

009 – Storytelling and Why You Should Rehearse Everything

Announcer: Do you dream of making a living as a speaker, writer, or performer? Do you want to learn to communicate with clarity, focus, and power? In each episode you will learn the secrets of dynamic communication so you can make a living doing what you love.

Welcome to the Art and Business of Public Speaking with your host, who, for over 30 years has helped men and women build exciting careers, Ken Davis.

Brian: Hey, this is Brian Scheer, your cohost of the Art and Business of Public Speaking, where we peek behind the curtain to discover how to create, grow and maintain a successful career as a communicator.

How are you doing today, Ken?

Ken: Well, hey Brian, the sun is shining, there's a cool breeze outside and I'm breathing. That's all really good. I'm doing great.

Brian: That's great, and something to be thankful for. You're still breathing.

Ken: Yes. Still breathing.

Brian: Well, we're going to continue on our podcast here, the second part of our interview with Bob Stromberg, who we just had a blast with. And I know, Ken, you had a great time with him as well.

Ken: Right. And you know our interviews usually go about half an hour. This one ran about an hour and every bit of it was good, so we're going to go on to the second part today, and this is fascinating because Bob is going to show us how we can go through life with our eyes open so we can recognize great stories that exist around us in everyday life that most of the time people just walk past. But as communicators, as speakers, as performers, we can't afford to do that. And so he's going to show us how we can find those and how we can use them in our presentation. And he's got a neat little method for doing it that you'll see in the interview.

Brian: Great. Well, let's get ready. Enjoy the interview with Bob Stromberg.

Ken: We had Bob Stromberg on another podcast and he was one of those interviews that was so rich and he was so caustic and mean, that we had to bring him back. So he's with us here again. He agreed to stay longer, and we decided to incorporate him into another full podcast which will cost us a great deal of money but Bob, I'm excited to talk about some other issues with you. I hope you're glad that you stayed with us.

Bob: I am. All that extra money – where was that going again? Explain that to me.

Ken: It's in my pocket, Bob. It's in my pocket. You know, I wanted to ask you this. One of the questions, or one of the reasons that you are such an amazing performer is your ability to tell stories. You have been with us over the years in some of the workshops that we do, the conferences that we do. Particularly talking about this marvelous skill of telling stories. Can you talk to the people who are listening today a little bit about how you

recognize, find, develop meaningful stories that hold people's attention and maybe allow you to open their hearts to truth that can change their lives? I know that's one of your key desires in your performance. Can you talk about how you find those stories and develop them?

Bob: Yeah, well I can and the reason I can is because so many people have asked me the very same question. How do you do that? How do you find those stories? Some people have said boy, I wish some things like that in my life had happened. And I am absolutely certain that things like that have happened in their lives, but they haven't recognized it.

And they can't see it. And I tell them, well, you may not have a knack for stories now, writing or telling stories, but you can. And here I say, you can get it. I have this, what do you call that where you have a – each letter means something else?

Ken: Oh, that's an acronym.

Bob: Acronym. I always call it an axiom. It's an anagram. I have an anagram. Acronym. Yes, GIT. G stands for grab, and I say grab anything that grabs you emotionally. And when I say it grabs you emotionally, I mean any emotions, not necessarily something that makes you weep but what's a story you hear or what happens in your life that makes you - boy that made me angry. Or this made me really concerned. Or this made me really sad. Or this made me laugh out loud. That's being moved emotionally. I say, if it grabs you emotionally, then you grab it. And when I say grab, get it down on paper. And in my case I'll do it in my phone in my little notes thing on my iPhone. But through the years there've been lots of ways that I've grabbed them. Grab them so you don't lose them because you will lose them. You'll forget it and you'll say, remember that thing that happened to me? And you'll forget it.

I used to take off, I'd go to bed, it's like when you go to bed, and right before you fall asleep you think of something that you need to do the next morning. And I'm going, I can't go to sleep without doing something, or I'll forget it. So I'll take off my watch and toss it across the room. And then in the morning I'll go, where's my watch? Oh, it's on the floor. Oh, that's right, I was going to call so and so.

Ken: Wow. Let me interrupt here. I've got to interrupt you because you've got to help me. I want you to finish your story and I'm not trying to be rude, but if I threw my watch across the room, I would wake up in the morning, the rest of the day I would spend looking for my watch. And when I found it I would go, oh, thank God I found my watch. And that would be the end of it.

Bob: At your age, Ken, in another five years and you'll forget you even wore a watch. You'll be rubbing your wrist, but there's something about my wrist I can't remember.

Ken: Maybe you were going to add this, but I would say, get it good. I woke up one night, thought of a great illustration. I don't know if you've ever heard me tell this story. Reached over for a pad of paper, wrote down the illustration, went back to sleep. Woke up in the morning, on the piece of paper, Bob, was the word "chicken." Nothing else. To this day, I have no idea what that was about. So I'm sorry I interrupted you, and I

hope you can continue your train of thought. But help us know how to grab it so that – have you ever written something down and then not understood your writing? Or a couple of words and you don't know what they mean?

Bob: Well, you need to write down a couple more words, then. Make sure you're going to understand it. And honestly, for the last 20 years, I've only typed. My handwriting, I can't understand. I used to be fairly good at penmanship. No more. It's just awful. So you grab it. You put it where you know it's safe.

I stands for interrogate. You keep coming back to it and you interrogate that thought. You look at it. You open up your notepad. I open up my notes on my iPhone and I say to that, whatever I've written down, why did you move me? Why would I read you? Do I still feel that emotion? How could I use this illustration? What does it mean? What is the deeper meaning in this? Are there several meanings in this?

I might make a few little notes by it and then put it away. At least it's safe. I know it can't get away. But you have to keep coming back and interrogating and interrogating and interrogating. If you do that, the truth of that story, whatever it is, the illustrative properties of that story, they will make themselves known. And I've talked to pastors about this. These guys and women, they have to preach every Sunday. And there's no end to it. And Wednesday comes along and it's Wednesday. And I'm on a train going down a track for this bridge that's out, and I think this is the Sunday I'm going over.

And so you've got to keep coming back and very often if you're doing that in a disciplined way, through your creative mind, which we all have – all of us have creative abilities – and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the truest of those stories will go. Very often they will appear at the very moment when we need them. There it is. Got it. Oh, I can't believe it. I got.

Now sometimes that will make itself evident in an hour, a couple days, a week. Sometimes it will be years before it comes. One of my stories which you've heard I think probably a number of times – the story of my music teacher Miss Nagel, which has become the core of my show *That Wonder Boy Now*, and I've told the story hundreds – well thousands of times probably over my career. That took 20 years of wondering what on earth might this mean. What would this story mean?

So you grab it, you interrogate it. It makes its truths known to you and then, this is really important, T stands for transform. And the transformation process is the writing process and the rehearsal process. I tell people, don't even tell a joke without rehearsing it. People say they hear a joke – oh I can tell this at the club tonight, or I'll open my sermon with this because it fits my sermon so well. Well you better practice that joke or it will fail.

You've got to practice and practice. You've got to get those words. And in terms of writing, what are the words that you choose? Use the best words. Use words creatively. Use words beautifully. That's what the words are there for and that transformation process – you grab it, you interrogate it, the truth is there. Now you've

got to tell that story and you've got to tell it in a way that it works. Because you just can't get up there and ramble on what you know to be the truth.

Ken: Right. That practice is so important. You know, the other beautiful thing that happens when you practice, like our friend McNair Wilson says, on your feet, out loud. When you say it out loud, there are elements of that, what I call tags – the next line. Call backs. Whatever it is. Throwbacks. But also additions.

Years ago, one of the first tapes I made, I made a tape about why – I made a tape. How about that? Now everybody can go, what's a tape? Well, what is that? Well it would be a DVD now. We made it into a DVD. It was one of the original talkies.

Bob: People are now saying what's a DVD. It's streaming video.

Ken: And I talked about why children don't want to go to bed. And it's because that prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake" – I ended that with "I don't want to go to bed." That was the end of it. It was just an addition to all of the other reasons that a kid doesn't want to go to bed.

I watched Tim Hawkins, who you and I both admire as an amazing comedian the other day use that same principal. He didn't get it from me. He's got his own brain and he's just absolutely amazing. But he talked about that same prayer and how it scares little kids. And then at the end of it he goes – and these are the kind of little tags I'm talking about – after the prayer is over he says to his child, okay, sleep well. Or something like that. Sleep tight. Have a nice night. He's just told him he might die, and then he starts to walk away and he turns around and goes, you've got about a 50/50 chance, so just sleep well.

Those little things, those little additions attach themselves to the stories we're telling. They're exaggeration of the truth we're understanding. It isn't changing the story. But I cannot encourage anyone who wants to learn the art of humor, the art of story – one of the greatest encouragements I would give them, and I'm wondering about you is practice. That thing you just said is so important. In that transformation the story transforms. Would you agree with that?

Bob: Absolutely I would. And, the way it transforms normally is, if you're one, and I would recommend this, too, I would actually recommend typing things out on the page. For you and me, Ken, we have the opportunity to be in front of people a lot. And we can develop things on stage a bit. We can do – I'm going to do this three minute thing, two minute thing. I'm going to squeeze it in between two pieces I know are going to work. I'll squeeze it in and see if something starts to happen with it. And we can develop on stage.

But most people don't have that opportunity. And especially if you're telling a bigger story, for me personally I would prefer to choose my words well and I would type it out on a sheet. And then I would do it out loud. And what I found is when I have a manuscript, and I start doing it out loud, I almost immediately find I could lose this entire paragraph. I'm going to lose this entire paragraph, too. I'm going to have just

one sentence here instead of eight. So the editing process – less is almost always more in a story. You’ve got to focus it down so it’s clear what you’re doing. Choose your words carefully.

Ken: When I made our movie *Fully Alive*, the guy who was helping us produce that movie talked about story, and I want you to address this. And again, in our podcast we’re not looking for people who agree with us. We’re looking for people who have unique and differing opinions, and if they agree, that’s great, and if they don’t that’s great. But this is what he suggested. He said a good story has a clear beginning, a developing dilemma. And he said a real good story has what seems like a resolution that leads to an even worse dilemma. And then a resolution and the end.

So what parts of that do you agree with? I’m sure not all stories have all of those elements, but some of the best movies we’ve seen, and some of the best stories we’ve heard, you think it’s over, and it’s not. And I think, especially with humor sometimes if you let people think it’s over and then they find that there’s another level to this. What are your thoughts on that?

Bob: As you describe it, I go yeah. Boy, I’d like to have a few stories like that. Because that would be ideal, wouldn’t it, if all the stories were like that? But now, here’s another thing for a working professional on stage. If you have three stories like that, you can’t tell them all.

Ken: That’s right. That’s so true.

Bob: You have to focus in, so some stories ought to be three minutes long or four minutes long. And it’s great to have a 12 or 13 or 14 minute story. But on stage, that’s a big deal to have a story that long, I think. So yes, different kinds, I would say, there are lots of different kinds of stories. This is interesting, Ken. When I did early in my career, and this was fun for me, I heard somebody once give what they called a recitation. And recitations were poetic stories that used to be used to teach kids the alphabet or Bible verses or a catechism. Real popular in the late 1800s – even before that. There are old, old recitations like that.

And I thought, what if I were to create some stories that actually used that poetic recitative form and see if I could tell them in a modern setting. It was really fun because it helped me to use structure very, very carefully. Because I’m actually now trying to rhyme in couplets and internal rhymes and stuff like that. So it was an opportunity to really work with language carefully. To choose words carefully and see what I end up with. And some of them were very popular when I was telling it.

Ken: You got a little short one?

Bob: Well I’ll give you an example of – I haven’t told this story in ages but I think you’ve seen this one. I walk on stage with a goose. It’s not a real goose, but it looks for everything like a real goose. And I’ll walk up in the front row and say, you ever seen one of these up close? And I’ll ask, would you like to pet the back? Touch the foot. And I say would you like to pet the top of the head? And they reach up for the head and the head turns

and people – I remember once at a campfire seeing somebody go right over on the bench. Just screaming. Very, very fun moment.

But I'll just give you a couple. This is my goose. At least I say she's mine. I suppose she is for a time. She's been injured, you see. So for a little while she's staying with me. No eagle claw or hook, beak or furled brow. Of these she has no need for she's quite content to fill herself on things among the weed and small fish. That's a dainty dish if you're a goose. And then on and on. But it's that poetic style, and I try to kind of disguise it so they don't feel like it gets rhymy and sign-songy. But playing with language that way is a fun thing to do.

Ken: You know what amazes me is that when people demonstrate in comedy or in a one man play or in any area like that a talent. Again, going back to our Tim Hawkins example, and you do the same thing with your guitar playing and singing. When they demonstrate a talent it becomes part of what they're doing. Whoa! This person is a horn, poetry, whatever it might be. The clever use of language. I think that in a world where – and I'm just going to say this because I believe it to be true – where entertainment is taking the lowest roads. That some of the greatest entertainment is the entertainment that takes the highest roads. From the terms of good language, and I always enjoy comedy that I identify as brilliant comedy. Comedy that demonstrates that somebody knows history from the inside out. Who was the guy that did football for a while? Dennis Miller. Brilliant.

Bob: And I don't understand half of what he's talking about because he's referring to movies from the 30s, music from the 20s and literature and history and geography. I agree with you. Wow. Listen to this guy.

Ken: When a guy pulls a comedy bit out of the Dead Sea Scrolls, you know, even though you don't get it, you go wow. I haven't read those.

Bob: Well here's an important point in this regard, Ken. If you or I try to pretend to be Dennis Miller we would fail miserably. And that's really important for people to know. If anybody tries to be Ken Davis, it will not work. It doesn't work with Ken very often. If somebody trying to be Bob Stromberg – you have to find your own voice. You have to find your own thing at this.

Ken: I'm going to take that as the best tip of the day that we can possible give. That is a marvelous tip. I want to ask you one question before we leave. What is this latest one man play that you're doing, and how can people find out about that?

Bob: That Wonder Boy. They just go to thatwonderboy.com and you can check it out there. Actually, I'm not sure when this podcast will broadcast, but it probably will be closed by the time this happens, but we've had a wonderful run in Minnesota now. We've got a couple great reviews which are not easy to come by in this world.

This play is really my heart. It's kind of my opus, in a way, because it gives me an opportunity to do so many of these things that I love doing and have used in my career forever. But it really addresses the question, how does a guy like myself, who grew up

in the most wonderful, loving family and the most caring group of neighbors in this wonderful, beautiful, idyllic setting in Pennsylvania, just a wonderful childhood – how can I become a comedic artist when our culture tells us all great art comes from great suffering? And if you haven't suffered – I had a college professor tell me that in 1972, and those words mocked me for 40 – ALL. Might that be a sweeping generalization?

Ken: Do you think that was a forecast of Howie Mandel when you were on America's Got Talent, rubbing his head and going, is that all you got? Maybe that was forecast.

Bob: The main thing is, that would devastate some people. And in fact, I saw it devastate – those kind of comments from those kind of judges – I saw it devastate people. Especially children. Oh my goodness. How can you do that to these kids?

But I'll tell you, what I realize that some great art can come from a grateful heart full of joy. And who would exchange a heart full of joy for a life of suffering simply to produce a great work of art when the purpose of art in the first place, at least in part, is to bring joy into the world? And see Ken, this is the point of the play, and I end by this – I know who I am. And I know where I came from and I know what I'm here to do. And that is to share this joy with the world in an artistic way.

Ken: I can't think of a better way to end this interview and I can't wait until I get a chance to see you again. Because whenever that happens there is sickness and pain and suffering because I laugh harder than I laugh in my life. Thank you, Bob Stromberg.

Bob: Hey, be sure to have your producer hang on for a few minutes so I can give him my address to get the check.

Ken: Yes, I'll do that. Oops – we're losing the connection. I think it's gone!

Brian: Wow. What a great interview. We are so grateful that Bob spent that much time with you Ken, and I know you had a great time and he was a wealth of information.

Ken: Yeah, he was like an hour's worth of wealth of information. Most of our podcasts only go about 30 minutes, but we got going with him and he had so much to say, and he is such a consummate storyteller. That was just fantastic.

I loved his advice on how to find stories in your own life. What was that acronym again that he gave?

Brian: GIT. Grab it, interrogate it and transform it.

Ken: So you grab a hold of it. You know another thing that he covered, we covered together, really that I don't want people to forget. The GIT part, that acronym – I keep wanting to say anagram. But maybe we ought to make a t-shirt with GIT It on there. We can make it available to the people who listen to the podcast.

But anyway, the other part of that that is so important is to live a life that allows you to see it in the first place. You can't GIT it until you see it. And so if you are a professional communicator, if you want to be a professional communicator, whether you're speaking or writing or whatever it might be, you've got to live life with your eyes open.

Remember how he talked about anything that moves you emotionally? You've got to be looking for that. When you get up in the morning you actually ought to say a prayer – show me some stories today. Because life really is a story, and if you live it with your eyes open, you're going to see them.

Brian: Well, I want to encourage everyone to go to DynamicCommunicators.com. There you will find all of the Show Notes from this podcast and all of our other podcasts. And also find out information on how you can bring Bob in for your next event. And I can guarantee, if you bring him in, it's such a unique experience. Everyone in that audience will be...

Ken: They're going to go nuts. They're going to be on the floor. The man is absolutely hilarious and he brings great content.

Brian: Hey, it's time for our Road Tip segment. Ken, what do you got for the Road Tip?

Ken: I got a single word. And the single word is EARLY.

Brian: Another acronym.

Ken: No. It's not. It's not an acronym. It's a word. Early. And here's what I mean by that. This is my tip. Get to wherever you're going early. Get to your destination early. Don't plan trips so that you get there just in the nick of time.

Secondly, get to the hotel early so that you have time to exercise, you have time to prepare your mind, your heart. Whatever you have to do before the show.

Thirdly, get to the venue early. And I love to get to the venue early simply because it gives me a chance to shake some hands, say hi to people. I'm not sure there's anything that's more of a turnoff than someone who just appears, does their show, and leaves and doesn't make contact with anyone. So I like to get there early. That also gives you a chance to head off any problems that might happen.

Brian: One of the single most important things that any artist, speaker, communicator of any kind can do is meet and greet some people. Because the sponsor of that event will notice that. They will bring you back time and time again, and that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to grow your business and maintain this successful career. That's a key takeaway here.

All right. Now, don't forget, if you want to get all of the Show Notes, not only from this interview but all of our podcasts, you can go to DynamicCommunicators.com. Also, we'll include in there information on how you can bring Bob in for your next event.

Ken: Right. And any of the DVDs we've talked about – all of it's available there.

Brian: You know, you reference one of my favorite titled DVDs that you've done, and you've done multiple DVDs is *Together Again for the First Time*. When I heard that title, I just went, that is an awesome title. You and Bob did this together. If you want to fall off your chair laughing, you've got to get this DVD.

Ken: I keep saying, oh, that comedy coat bit – I almost died performing it just from all of the things he was whispering in my ear. It's just great.

Brian: It's the best hour a family can spend together. And it's such a variety of different talents that you'll see on stage. So again, that is located at DynamicCommunicators.com in our Show Notes. We'd love for you to check it out.

Thanks for joining us. We'll see you next week.