THE INDELIBLE ART OF STORYTELLING
How To Help Your Listeners Never Forget What You Say
Dan Wilt

(SLIDE 1)

REMARKABLE PEOPLE

I'd like you to take a moment with me, as we begin, to think about someone in your life who you might say is truly "remarkable." Maybe it's a family member, or a friend – but it's someone who you have watched go through an incredibly difficult circumstance and they emerged better rather than bitter.

My wife's grandmother was one of those people for me.

She died some years ago at the rich age of 96, and I had the privilege of presiding over her funeral. She was one of the last living survivors of the Armenian genocides that took place under the Ottoman Turks at the turn of the 20th century. Grandma Anouche, as we called her, was a truly *remarkable* woman.

ONE WINTER EVENING

One winter evening, my wife and I asked her to sit in a living room, with our young children gathered at her feet, to tell them her fascinating story. We felt they should hear the dramatic details of her journey straight from her own lips, before her live telling of the story was one day lost to us.

Grandma Anouche told us how her family, living among the beautiful orchards in their city of Urfa, Turkey, was awakened in the middle of the night by the shouts of Turkish soldiers. She was just in her pre-teen years; a young girl at a tender age.

Her entire family was forced outside along with the others in her village; the men were corralled into the churches – which were then burned to the ground. The women and children were marched through the scorching Syrian Desert until they died of overexposure and starvation. She told us story after story about the atrocities that that were committed against her people – and those she loved most in the world. (Her life

was miraculously spared, but that story will have to wait for another time.)

In the midst of the evening, one of my children spoke up. Her little voice whispered, “Do you forgive them?” Do you forgive them? She was asking Grandma if she forgave those who had killed her parents. Grandma Anouche looked at my little girl, and with a gentle smile, this small, frail, but bright-eyed woman of God answered, “Of course I forgive them, honey! Unforgiveness does not hurt them; it only hurts us.”

FORGIVENESS AND THE WORSHIPER

Jesus said, in Matthew 6:12, "…And forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors."

Maybe you, like I, have struggled to forgive someone at some point in your journey. A worshipper of Jesus chooses to take our tightly held offenses and hurts and release them before God on the altar of His incomparable love. We forgive, as we have been forgiven.

I want to encourage you, go away from here today and this week, and examine your life for

areas of unforgiveness that may still be poisonously lurking beneath the surface of your heart, embittering your soul. Resolve to pray those areas through, all the way to forgiveness, with someone who knows you and cares about you.

Then you'll be free to be as remarkable as that person you thought about earlier – and as remarkable as Grandma Anouche.

(Pause)

WHAT JUST HAPPENED

Now, what just happened? I told you a story. I told you a very particular kind of story, from my own life, and it may have been clear to you that I had a particular end in mind even as I began to tell the story. I was going somewhere.

You'll have to be the judge as to whether or not we actually arrived where I seemed to be taking us. Like my teenage son behind the wheel, I may know where he's going – I'm just never sure he'll actually *end up there*.

A 5-STEP PATTERN FOR MEMORABLE STORYTELLING

I want to talk to you about how to tell a great, memorable story. I learned mostly from listening to my grandfather tell stories to me on his front porch swing in our small town in Pennsylvania – and I want to teach you the principles I gleaned from listening to him.

I'll regularly refer to the story I just told as an example of a clear, concise 5-step pattern for consistently telling memorable stories on the air – a pattern that I hope will be a game-changer for those of us who feel weak in this area, and for those of us who simply want be more effective at what we do.

THE INDELIBLE ART OF STORYTELLING

I've titled this talk *The Indelible Art Of Storytelling: How To Help Your Listeners Never Forget What You Say.*

(SLIDE 2)

Jimmy Neil Smith, the President and Founder of the International Storytelling Center in Tennessee, once said, "We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn't a stronger connection between people than storytelling."

Stories are irreplaceable for permanently marking someone's life with an unshakeable truth. In our world of radio where our listeners can't see us, and even in the world of stages, where our listeners can see us, how we tell a story in the few moments we're given has everything to do with whether or not that story *changes a life*.

STORIES WITH STICKING POWER

I believe that we can all tell stories that, like movies, are hard to shake – stories that have penetrating, *sticking power*. Stories that are, by all definitions of the word, *indelible*.

Now, before we go on, let me say that some of us who talk for a living think that the more

words we use the better the story we're telling will be. I know that none of you can relate to this, but it's true – for some – on other stations. Using a gallon of words to give a spoonful of thought doesn't always work – in fact it hardly ever works.

How do we tell indelible stories that never leave our listeners?

Here is our 5-step, indelible storytelling mantra. I'll say it first, then you say it with me.

(SLIDE 3)

"1) Tell your l.i.f.e. stories to 2) link, 3) inspire, 4) faith-build, and
5) encourage your listener."

(High-five someone beside you.)

(SLIDE 4)

1. TELL

TELL-ing, or “tell-ink” is the first of our indelible inks. Tell what? Tell *your* everyday life stories.

When we use the phrase “life story,” we often think that a person only has *one* life story, and it’s the big kahuna that summarizes everything that you have ever done. You’ve heard this story before. It’s the one that comes out of someone who has had just a little too much to drink.

But I believe that we each have many life stories, hundreds of them each month, going on all around us, ripe for the picking.

So how do we choose the life stories we’re going to tell?

(SLIDE 5)

Here are some tips:

- **Trust that your stories matter.** They are given to you for a purpose, whether they relate to your baby's diaper or the ecstatic moment when you tasted your favorite meal at your favorite restaurant this week. Trust that your stories have significance – mine them for gold and look for lessons within them.

- **Document everything.** I use a note-taking app to audio-document any moment in my life that feels like it may have a lesson brewing within it. I always have my phone at the ready just in case anything unique or interesting occurs. My teenagers and twenty-somethings love this; they never know if they're going to be on the air for something "profound" they said. It's a great power tool to have around – a power trip tool.

- **Fake it till you make it.** Listen voraciously to other peoples' stories, and begin to mimic them. Do it their way until it gives way to your way. It's a great way to learn anything. I heard a comedian the other night who was a master storyteller and he had my wife and I crying with laughter. I've told a few stories since on his same topics, with a dash of his lingo and mannerisms. The art of originality is in concealing your sources. Find Master Storytellers, then be a *copy-cat*.

Tell-ing, or tell-ink, is indelible ink. Your life stories matter in impacting your listeners with enduring truth.

Let's rinse and repeat our mantra, and unpack the pattern revealed in the last half.

(SLIDE 6)

"Tell your l.i.f.e. stories to link, inspire, faith-build, and encourage your listener."

(SLIDE 7)

2. LINK

LINK-ing, or “link-ink,” is an indelible way to introduce your story. It’s not really even a part of the story itself. It is the trailer before the movie, the pre-chorus before the chorus, the John The Baptist moment heralding what is coming next – it is gluten-free bread holding the low-sodium meat of the story you’re about to tell in its place. (We all come from someone’s kitchen, don’t we?)

I will contend that the entire story you are about to tell depends on you linking effectively first. It doesn’t take long, but it has to happen. So, what is *link-ink*?

At the beginning of my story, I chose one of a hundred ways you can link with your listener before the story even starts. I said, “I’d like you to think, for a moment, about someone in your life who you might say is truly ‘remarkable.’” I was connecting my story to your life, right at the gate.

(SLIDE 8)

Here are some tips.

- **Engage them with their own story.** My hope, in that moment, was that you would begin to subconsciously visualize a person's face in your mind. I followed that up with, "My wife's grandmother was one of those people for me." When I said the word "was," you may have noted that she had died. We shared an unspoken, human moment together about remarkable people in our lives that have passed on. We subconsciously connected without actually *hugging*.

- **Remember why they listen.** People have tuned in to your program because they want to connect their life with yours for a few moments. If you're a host, you are a celebrity whether you like it or not. That automatically puts a thin pane of glass between you and your listener. Shatter it right at the start. Close the gap, connect, and validate their less "popular" life by

finding a connecting point with your own. *Our goal is to magnify their story with God – not lose them in ours.*

- **Take just a moment.** Linking doesn't have to take long. In fact, it shouldn't. A simple phrase like, "We've all had the experience…" or "When I was 15, in that awkward year between being a kid and being a young adult…" or "You may had a moment in your life when…" – those phrases will help your listener identify with you – and give you permission to speak into their life.

Linking, or link-ink, is indelible ink. It will keep a listener coming back because they feel like you're "with" them in their life story – and you have their best interests at heart.

Let's say our pattern again:

(SLIDE 9)

"Tell your l.i.f.e. stories to link, inspire, faith-build, and encourage your listener."

(SLIDE 10)

3. INSPIRE

INSPIRE-ing, or "inspire-ink," is the actual storytelling part. It's the low-sodium, but high-fat, delicious meat in the sandwich that almost makes the gluten-free bread taste like real *food*. We're going to take a little more time here than on the others.

After you've linked, if you inspire your listener in the next few moments, your story will have – I promise you – an indelible impact on the person who heard it. Here is where the real art of storytelling comes in – and we can learn this.

(SLIDE 11)

Here are some tips:

- **Create anticipation.** If you don't get them in the first moment, you won't have them for the best part of your story. In our example, I started by telling you about my wife's Grandma who had survived the Armenian genocides. Fascinating. It was my soft version of the cliffhanger moment that opens the old Stallone movie, or the opening music of Downton Abbey.

  I wanted you all to wonder, if just for a moment, "What's could possibly be coming next?" Anticipation begins at the beginning of your story. It's the bait on the hook to draw your listener in. As my producer, Dave Senes says, "The arc of a great story is fueled with anticipation. Without it, the arc becomes a flat line."

- **Use color and passion.** I spiced the story up with words like "remarkable," "beautiful," "scorching," "frail," "bright-

eyed” to help you imaginatively enter the story with me. I attempted to paint with words on our imaginations, saying that my children were “at their grandmother’s feet,” on “a winter evening.”

- **Say how it felt.** Storytelling communicates and moves the feelings; journalism delivers the facts. Keep your facts as straight as possible, but don’t get lost in them so they steal emotion from your story. Your listener will remember how you made them feel, and the pictures their imagination created – but they will secondarily remember the facts. Engage your listener through their feelings.

Inspiring, or inspire-ink, is indelible ink. It will transport your listeners into your experience as if they were living it themselves.

Let’s say our phrase again:

(SLIDE 12)

"Tell your l.i.f.e. stories to link, inspire, faith-build, and encourage your listener."

(SLIDE 13)

4. FAITH-BUILD

FAITH-BUILD-ing, or “faith-build-ink” is the next step in our pattern. Here, you may remember that I shifted gears. You probably felt it. I actually paused to change the phase we were in, and to let the story sink in. Remember, silence works as well as words in good storytelling. It’s called, “the pregnant pause.”

I started quoting Jesus, and I started to unpack, relating back to the story, what our shared faith has to say about forgiveness. If you will, the inspiring story was just the diving board we bounced on, to prepare us to do the real work of a *cannonball*. The cannonball is the faith-building stage in our work.

Many people who tell stories without this 5-step pattern in mind bounce up and down on the diving board of the inspirational story, get lost in the details, and never actually take you with a splash into the deeper waters of faith. I said, “Maybe you have struggled to forgive

someone….” At that point, we were swimming in the deep end.

(SLIDE 14)

Some tips on building faith in our listeners?

- **Bring God into it**. Leverage the lesson to hook your listener up with the Source of Life. If we don't, we'll leave them clinging to our personality, charisma, or quick-wit. That may one day burn us out and it will definitely leave your listener impoverished. This is the pastoral moment that gives your story lasting meaning. Connect them to Christ.

- **Grow deeper yourself.** If you're jammed up, your stories will evidence that over time. Your stories will start to ring hollow, and like all good art, will begin to reveal the state of your soul. Keep feeding yourself on the Scriptures, worship, faith-empowered books, songs, and accountable relationships.

- **Keep your hand on the pulse.** Personalities that are "larger than life" through the magnifier of media need to stay

> ever closer to the places where life spills on the floor. I stay close to my family, to the felt-needs of my neighbors, and always keep the poor in front of me – because Jesus knows that caring for the poor will keep us all sensitive and *human*. That's why he talked so much about it.

Faith-building, or faith-build-ink, is indelible ink. It will leverage the gift of your story powerfully in each listener's journey into Christ.

Let's say the phrase together; we're almost there:

(SLIDE 15)

"Tell your l.i.f.e. stories to link, inspire, faith-build, and encourage your listener."

(SLIDE 16)

5. ENCOURAGE

Finally, ENCOURAGE-ing, or “encourage-ink” is that indelible moment when we cheer on our listener to courageous *action*. After you have linked with your listener, inspired them with a Technicolor story, held them fast to their faith in Jesus as their Source – then joyfully encourage them to *respond*.

At the end of my story, I made a suggestion. I said, “I want to encourage you to go away from here and examine your life for areas of unforgiveness….”

I began to gently, but cheerfully, give you a way to respond. We all need inspiration, with clear encouragements, to keep us moving forward.

(SLIDE 17)

Here are some tips:

- **Suggest a "next right thing."** Don't leave them hanging. They will feel overwhelmed by the message of the story, and in my experience a listener doesn't need us to tell them *everything* they need to do. They just need us to suggest a next right thing they *could* do to move toward greater hope and wholeness in that area.

- **Point to a community.** Isolation is the most toxic virus infecting the planet right now. They came to your station, to your voice, for a sense of community; give them a pointer to their local church or to a website where they can interact. This, personally, is what I think is the genius of *Keep The Faith*. We conclude our stories with an invitation to an interactive website where they can get *honest*.

- **Tell them, "You can do this."** That is encouragement at its very best. Like we do

with our kids, look your listener in the eye (in your mind if you're on the air), and just tell them "You can do it." "You can apply this lesson." "You can be Jesus in your circumstance, in your home, in your struggle." Give them Hope – Hope that God will meet them as they step forward in response to His invitation.

Encouraging, or encourage-ink, is indelible ink. It will give your listeners the next right action they can take to grow in wholeness as a child of God.

CONCLUSION

Say it with me, once more:

(SLIDE 18)

"Tell your l.i.f.e. stories to link, inspire, faith-build, and encourage your listener."

This is a 5-step pattern that begins with your choice to tell your life stories, and ends with one life, on the other end, indelibly impacted for a lifetime.

You are, in many ways, the frontline faith voices in people's cars, homes, and offices. You didn't know it, but you and others like you carried my family and I through some of our darkest moments.

(SLIDE 19)

That is why I have faith for you to grow as an indelible storyteller – and why it's been such a great privilege for me to share these ideas with you today. Thank you for listening.