

When the Audience Weeps: Conveying Emotion as a Storyteller

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Recently I told a story at a venue on Harvard Square for adults, mostly in their twenties. They'd bought their tickets for *Beowulf: The Only One* and at the end, two young women in the audience burst into tears, crying openly. I heard it from the stage and spoke with them afterwards. Yes, it was us, they said. They'd felt the emotion in Beowulf's death scene. This story lasts 80 minutes and is told with narration, character voices and a score on 12-string guitar.

Obviously they'd suspended disbelief and had immersed in the tragic beauty of the tale. Earlier, they'd laughed at some humorous moments, as everyone had. Audience laughs are one thing. Comics do it all the time. Summoning tears, however, is quite another.

During a certain imagination exercise in my story workshops, participants who are trapped in a dark cave find a hidden door and escape into blinding sunlight. Many report feeling their actual pupils contract, in their physical eyes, even though it's a

purely imaginary light. Emotion in storytelling is much like that. It's not real, but it is. As Bruno Bettelheim wrote in *"The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales"*, "While the fantasy is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us."¹ We humans are designed for empathy. Your audience wants you to take them there.

Other than tales I've written myself, I've always searched around for stories with what I call "juice." Not until being asked to write this article have I realized that means emotional juice. A whiff of truth. A strange twist. Wisdom lurking in there somewhere. An insight that the story shot into me when I first encountered it, one that told me, Ah, I have been moved. This is worth passing on.

So ask yourself, firstly, what does this story make me feel? And feel so much that I'm willing to do the hard work of learning it for others? To put myself out there with it as a "love gift," as Lewis Carroll would say. It depends upon who you are, of course, but if your answer doesn't come fairly quickly, you might be wasting your time. If the answer does come quickly, like an instinct, then it's probably a story worth working on.

Some stories have lots of juice simply because of what they're about, even when related in dispassionate language. Another way to find it is by emotionalizing one's voice. Usually that's done by deepening it, making it breathy or gravelly or husky, as a dramatic technique. If you sound emotionally invested, it's contagious, just like laughter or yawning. When film actors summon genuine tears, they're usually immersed in the emotions of real sadness they've experienced.

Similarly, if you're telling a true story from your life, when you remember how you felt—joyous, heartbroken, terrified, validated, loved—then the emotions often return full force and are very genuine, especially if you've found a way to tell the story that gets you back to that place.

Still another way is to use character voices, which is what I do in my work. Although they may be dramatic fictions you've invented, like the Beowulf character I mentioned earlier, they can experience huge emotions if you're willing to ask yourself, "How would I feel if I were that person?" It's an act of empathy.

At the end of one tale I tell, *The Dame Ragnell*, the emotions pouring from the heroine are so strong I always choke up, eyes getting moist, my voice wanting to crack. It's nerve-wracking. Not to collapse into a blubbing heap and ruin my show, I have keep it under control.

No matter which approach you choose, if the emotions in your story are real—and you've invested creative time in being clear about them yourself—the human feelings will shine through. Try it out and see what happens.

Who knows? Maybe someone in your audience will weep because of what you've learned to do.

¹ Bruno Bettelheim *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* London:Thames & Hudson, 1976

Click below to listen to excerpts:

Emotions in Beowulf

Emotions in Dame Ragnell

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Since 1982, **Odds Bodkin** has made his living as a master storyteller, author, creative musician and educator. He is renowned for his renditions of epic tales for universities and high schools and his ethics-based stories for children.

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