

## Getting to the Yes, And...

The Second City Podcast: Interview Transcript

Kelly Leonard x Murray Nossel

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Kelly Leonard: 00:00

My guest today on getting the 'Yes, And' is Murray Nossel. Murray is the founder and director of Narativ, a firm with offices in New York and London that specializes in storytelling training for business. Murray helps clients including fortune 500 companies, universities, and not for profits, create messages that genuinely represent who they are and what they do for onboarding recruitment, employee engagement, as well as branding and external messaging. Murray's on the Teaching Faculty of the program of Narativ Medicine at Columbia University. He is an Academy Award nominated filmmaker and his latest book is called Powered By Storytelling: Excavate, Craft and Present stories to Transform Business Communication. Murray Nossel, welcome to the show.

Murray Nossel: 00:40 Thanks so much for having me, Kelly.

KL: <u>00:42</u> First and foremost, I love that your new book on storytelling is so overwhelmingly concerned with the role of listening. So this

is obviously huge thing and improvisational training. I want you to talk about that. Like why would a storytelling book focused

so much on listening?

MN: 01:00 It kind of goes back to the origin of my listening and storytelling

method, which I discovered that without listening and storytelling, in other words, if there's nobody listening where do the stories go. I compare listening to a bowl and telling as the liquid that's poured into the bowl. Just as the bowl gives the liquid it's shape. So the listening, gives the telling it's shape. And I discovered this at the height of the AIDS epidemic when I was working as a social worker in New York City and my patients were dying and I realized that haven't been trained as a clinical psychologist, a previously in South Africa. All the therapeutic techniques that I'd been taught, we're kind of useless for people who are dying. The therapy is much too long term. People needed something that they could do very quickly, and very

urgently.

<u>02:02</u> And what I realized was that people were dying with a feeling

that they weren't leaving anything behind. These patients of mine, when they would die, they have their belongings and it would be packed into these black garbage bags and no one came to claim them. And so I felt that at least people could leave their stories behind. What was needed in order for people to leave their stories behind? We're a group of people or at

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least one person who was willing to listen without judgment, without interruption, without interpretation, in other words, just let people tell what happened to them. And so that's where I kind of really figured out the crucial role of listening, particularly in the story excavations phase.

KL: 02:51

This really spoke to me because in our work, we teach a lot of companies around the need to be others focused and improvisation sort of demands that you listened to the end of sentences because you're actually making up a script together. And we sort of have to say, we know this because we're on stage together in front of an audience, but in fact, you people are doing this every day; but you stopped listening normally halfway through sentences. Then you might be losing crucial information. So we actually have exercises where you have to begin your, a part of the sentence with the last word that the person just said to you, which forces you into this position of listening. And I love the way you say this. You say in the book, quote, your listening would be creating my speaking and my speaking would be creating your listening. I just think that's a lovely way to phrase it.

MN: 03:38

Thank you so much for that. Just in the very short time that we've been communicating now, there's already an exchange of listening and speaking, going on with the two of us. So when you mentioned, for example, improvisation and you talk about your personal experience with listening and storytelling, what that does is it expands my capacity now to listen to you. And it also alerts me to perhaps my own tendency to start formulating my thoughts and ideas while you're talking. So as you said that, it was a reminder to me to wait. Hold on a second.

KL: 04:16 Oh, no. Yeah, because we work in this field

MN: 04:21 off what you have to say.

KL: Yeah. I mean we work in this field, right? And, and, but we also

recognize that I always say we're doctors who smoke. I mean, you know, you know, this is a practice and you have to pay attention to it every single day if not hourly, because we do fall in those habits. And one of the things I think is really smart and this book is you talk about what's getting in the way and what's getting in the way is fear and judgment. And I thought this



quote spoke to me quote, the most effective way of enhancing creativity was learning how to suspend judgment.

MN: 04:55

If we are to be creative, it means that we are having to include brand new possibilities, right? We haven't ventured into territories that we haven't lived with or entered into before. Now what happens typically when we leave our comfort zone is we experience fear. And then the fear oftentimes presented as kind of some kind of self criticism will still itself. And so to be able to catch that and say, hold on a second, I'm just experimenting with something. I'm just playing with something. And that's what creativity demands. And if I'm going to judge myself in the middle of it all, I won't be able to actually expand my sort of creative output. So we have to learn how to suspend judgment first and let the creative ideas flow and only once they have flown, then we can go back and evaluate them. But to proposed critical thinking while you're trying to open your mind and be creative is going to always be counter productive.

KL: 06:06

One of your methods for doing this is calling out your own obstacles to listing, calling out your fear and your judgment, basically naming it right?

MN: 06:17

That's right. Yes. And that requires a high degree of self awareness. And that's what I'm seeing in all the work that I'm doing in companies and businesses of all shapes and sizes at the moment is there is an increased call out for self awareness. We need to be able to see how we are operating, particularly in teams and call ourselves out and rest aside our behaviors and our attitudes through this process of introspection, and if we are to empathize with others than again there is a tremendous calling at the moment for empathy and connection that begins with oneself. You have to be able to look inside yourself in order to be able to connect to other people.

KL: 07:05

I actually, I was in a meeting yesterday with colleagues. I had finished the book and I was typing up my notes and I mentioned this idea and so we did it where I was sort of like, what is blocking you? There was like six of us in the meeting, you know, what might be blocking you in. And I'm like for me, just over the weekend, like really badly sprained my big toe and I'm like, I'm very conscious of this thing. And other people started to name it and then we got into the flow of the meeting and everyone's sort of acknowledged like, what happened? Why was it that we



set it? That sort of freed us up. And it reminded me, and I've told the story on the podcast before, but my friend Alison Wood Brooks at Harvard gave me advice because I said, yeah, I was doing a lot of public speaking. I go, I'm good at it, but I do still get nervous. And she goes, just say before you go onstage, don't say you're nervous, say you're excited and say it out loud. And there's some science behind that of, you know, when you say it out loud, it can affect your ability to turn that nerve and to sort of positive stress. And I wonder if you sort of naming it has some roots and some of that science.

MN: 08:07

Naming is knowing we lived it; our experiences in life is just happening to us and around us and it's only when we stop and name what's happening to us and said we actually become aware of it. Otherwise it's just a big, you know, sort of ocean of experience. So naming it for me has two functions. So like you were saying, you were in a meeting and you named the fact that you were in pain. So it allowed you to carry on because, you were explaining to people why you might have a sort of a certain expression of pain on your face or what are your concentration might lapse for a moment. But what it's also doing is it's indicating to them what's on with you. So they see you shifting uncomfortably and your seat. They are not interpreting that as something that has to do with them.

09:04

I'm the one who did that. Well, I'm responsible for the fact that he looks so sort of uncomfortable. So once you tell people what's going on for you, they can actually relate to you so much more easily because they're not seeing it as personal or related to them. And you know, one of the greatest obstacles to listening that's occurring at the moment throughout, you know, all societies around the world who have technology is of course technology. You know, we've got these things beeping and buzzing all the time. And you know, oftentimes people can be texting under the table or distracted by notifications coming up on their computer screens. So there too, you know, we have to exercise a fair amount of sort of self discipline and, and be willing to sort of be responsible for being present for other people.

KL: 09:59

This is interesting. You just reminded me of something. My wife is a comedy professor, in addition to working at second city and improvisation, she just delivered a paper at a conference, and, the, a lot of people talk about perspective taking and one of her



theories, and it's a new theory, we haven't seen it out there, is that what really great comedians do is they do perspective giving. They provide an audience with a way in which you are going to consume their material and understand them, to create connection. And I think that's kind of what we're talking about here, when you, call out sort of your truth and you name your thing, you are giving a gift to the person who's next to you because they can now see you in your proper context.

MN: 10:38 I liked that and they can also see themselves.

KL: <u>10:42</u> Yes.

12:04

MN: 10:43

I'll give you an example here. So I was running a workshop in Boulder on the weekend and this workshop, especially like a live event for 100 people and the topic of the event was to help older people in the audience tell stories about their mothers. And this is part of a project, a massive project that I'm running at the moment, the world mother storytelling project. So I stand on the stage and the first thing I do, and this goes for everyone who has used this tool. Anyone who's listening to this right now used this tool: acknowledge your listeners and let them know that they're listening is making all the difference. So when I stand on that stage and I say to the audience, thank you for listening. You know, we're creating this together. Your listening is creating my speaking just as the bowl gives the liquid its shape. The listening, gives the speaking its shape, and my speaking is shaping my listening. We're in this together and thank you so much for creating that bowl of listening for me. And I can say the same for you right now. Kelly, you know, without your listening, without the things you've been saying to me, my speaking would have nowhere to go. So your listening is in fact a gift.

Yeah. Yeah, that's great. I want to also ask you from the sudden fears judgment section. You say quote, "avoid bringing your own analysis or caretaking to someone else's story." And I want

you to expand on that because I think that's nuanced.

MN: 12:24 What we want to be able to do if someone is telling a story, whether it's in a personal context or in a work context, if you

just want them to be able to tell their story, be present with them as they tell us their stories. So I'll give you an example. So I'm running a workshop in Cyprus and this is bringing together

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KL:

people from multiple different countries, some of them who are at war with one another. And I'm doing my sort of signature exercise which is called the grandparents exercise. Every single person to present themselves as one of their four grandparents. Now, a lot of people who attended this conference in Cyprus, which was for a large media organization that I write about it in my book, a lot of people had come from war torn countries where there was a lot of trauma and that began to cry.

MN: 13:16

Now if everybody starts to rush around the storyteller and put their arms around the storyteller, it will feed them clean, they're not really giving the storyteller the freedom just to tell their story and be with the emotion. So part of what happens to us when we, when we engage with a personal storytelling process are we unnecessarily engaging with emotions, right? Storytelling connects the head to the heart. Emotions are always involved. Now if we start to take care of some of the growth, they start to cry or become emotional. We're basically saying that there's something wrong with emotions and they need to be fixed; rather than recognizing that emotion or the expression of emotions are just part and parcel of the communication that happens when the gifts of listening and storytelling, our exchange. So it's often our own discomfort with emotions that that causes us to want to take care of someone which becomes emotional because they're telling a story. And for me that's just completely natural. If you're telling it, there's no story particularly about someone who's a loved one, like when of your four grandparents. Well, it's natural that emotions are going to arise and they're just part of the human experience.

KL: 14:32

Yeah. That's the thing that drives me crazy. I said it a million times, which I don't understand why we check our humanity when we get at the door of our business. It is the edge we have. And in fact, in an increasingly digitized and AI and robotized world, we need to draw on those emotions even more because the one thing that robots don't have and so that was very powerful. And I also want to note that you write about this in the book that initially when you were developing the grandparent exercise, you did it as the parent exercise, which I caught into right away because it won't work because there's too many issues with your parents. Whereas you have distance with your grandparents and an ability to, I think to draw on there, there's more distance that gives you the ability to deepen

that story and you're maybe just a little too close to your parents,

MN: Yes, that's true. I just saw it this weekend again when I was

asking people during the storytelling project to tell the stories of their own mothers to be closely connected to our parents and often we don't know where our parents begin and end. So yes, there isn't that distance. So it's easier to excavate the story

when it's a little bit more removed from you.

KL: <u>15:50</u> All right. So you have some issues with meetings.

MN: <u>15:55</u> Yes.

KL: 15:55 And so, I have some issues with meetings and I think the one of

the very early things you say is a quote, why are you calling a meeting? Like, to answer that question seems vital yet I don't.

Most people don't do that.

MN: This gets to the storytelling and it will suggest to the know organizing any kind of communication, get together in your

company or in your business, whatever it may be. So the first question I always asked myself when I'm going to tell a story is why story, why now there's so many different ways we have to communicate with one another. Why are we going to be, you know, tapping into this age, old, timeless, universal mode of communication called storytelling. Okay? Same thing applies to meetings when you're having a meeting, you have to ask the question, why am I having this meeting and why now? And that has to be communicated very, very clearly to all the people who are attending the meeting. So what often happens is people go to meetings as a matter of habit or because they think that they

need to be there or they're obliged to.

17:13 And then rather than being actually present in the meeting

where they may have something to contribute or at least they're listening is always contributing something, right? I mean even if you don't say a word in the meeting, the way that you listening and what you're listening for and the fact that you are there listening is crucial to the success of the meeting. Well, if you just go into the meeting as a kind of a habit and say that you have to just have to be there, you're listening is likely to go out of the window and what I've found is that people who attend meetings with the attitude that meetings are a waste of

time are desperately trying to multitask during the meeting. So they come into the meeting with a laptop or with their cell phone and then they are convincing themselves that they're actually being super productive by multitasking too.

18:03

The fact of the matter is that they aren't anywhere during that period of time. They're not present. So also behind this idea of really participating in meetings and knowing why you're in the meeting is the idea that we, when we are operating in teams, we are all shooting for the same goal. We are not operating in opposition to one another. So we need to work together to achieve those goals. And with that we need rules and the rules include the fact that if someone hogged all the time in a meeting and talked nonstop, not allowing other people a chance to speak, that could lead to all sorts of feelings and resentments, so what I bring to a meeting is the same approach that I bring to listening and storytelling. We sit down in our meeting and we do what you did yesterday, which was to say to people what was getting in the way.

19:00

If you're listening and then inviting other people to say what's getting in the way of their listening and once that's been achieved, you set an intention for the meeting in one word you say, you know, my intention for today is to be productive and that sets the framework for people to be able to share their stories, share their thoughts, share their ideas, and it has to be timed. People need to have a specific amount of time to speak and that's that. There has to be a dedicated timekeeper in that meeting who will stop people if they go on too long.

KL:

19:34

It's interesting because, you know, we have the neuroscience and the psychology of the behavioral science that shows us that people use stories. Stories are so powerful and so effective because it's the way we make sense of the world and then we know historically, uh, how, how storytelling, you know, what based on the basis of sort of modern civilization is rooted in storytelling and very much in theater and why theater was developed, which was sort of, you used the term organized organizing communication. And I'm like, oh, that's what theater is. Theater was a way of sort of organizing groups of people to then experience this kind of communication which went back and forth. Right? And I know this from working in the theater for so long, for nearly 30 years that the great gift of theater and, and what differentiates successful theater for nonsense, a

successful theater is the ability to create context for the audience.

20:29

So, you know, my wife always says there was an interactive dinner theater show called Tony and Tina's wedding, which was very popular and very cheesy, and she goes, you know why it's popular because everyone knows how to dress. Everyone knows how to attend this thing because they've all been to a wedding. I'm like, ah, that's it. So, a lot of the job we have in, in the theater making world is how do we very quickly a show these people or tell these people how to see the thing in front of them and experience it. And, and what you're saying too is like, do that for meetings. It's not too much because when you don't do that, you're wasting time. You're going to probably lose productivity. You're going to lose people because they're not going to want to hang around and work for people that they don't listen to them. They're boring. They're not setting them up for success.

MN: <u>21:16</u>

If you actually go into a meeting with the context in mind that that meeting could not be happening without you. That your listening and your presence and the wealth of experience that you bring into that meeting with you is actually contributing to the general sort of a pot of knowledge that's happening in that meeting. So I gained, this requires your recognition that who you are as a listener is important. It matches when you talked about the theater. My memory goes back to seeing (inaudible), 14,000 seats, and in that enormous amphitheater and you could stand in the center of that stage and light a match and everybody, all 14,000 people would hear it. So what you've got there with a giant collective experience and you've got a ritual and what we have lost in in the world that we live in at the moment are rituals.

22:18

That feeling that that we can participate in something that gives a lot some kind of meaning, some kind of connection to the greater whole. And yes, you can even bring that sense of theater as your saying that sense of ritual into a meeting, but that it has a beginning and a middle and an end and that meeting is contributing to the evolution of your enterprise, whatever it is. And so I am really calling hear to say, don't do things as a habit if you're going to do things simply as a habit or simply for the sake of doing them, then better, it's better just to send out a memo and, and do it in some other kind of way. If

you're going to have a meeting then make use of the fact that you are tapping into this age old tendency capacity of as human beings to get together and create something collective.

KL: 23:11

Yeah, that's a really valuable point because when you, when you speak about the world we live in right now like I I do. So I'm in an urban environment, a, I'm in a big city. We don't know our neighbors like we used to. We don't attend church like we used to. All of that stuff are facts we've got the facts and figures for it and even though I am not looking for a religion, what I do miss is there were rituals and there were rights that came along with them which fed us, which fed us in, in terms of having a, a broader community that can sort of, you know, a sort of allow us to understand how ethically we can live with each other. We can. And I think this is also the dissonance we have in our world today is because people are just, they're not listening to each other and they're not appreciating their differences and they're leaping to assumptions and they're categorizing. And this is all the stuff that in a business context you say it was really going to hurt you when you're, when you're messaging. But I think as a people it's really hurting us as a nation and as a community, as a world.

MN: 24:16

I agree with you. I've worked with a lot of media companies, including some of the biggest social media companies in the world and what these, these, some of these people within these organizations have recognized, you know, within some departments. Is that how you function within the company is actually what's it going to reflect how you function with the larger world outside of you. You know, so that, that in the sense we are all accountable for maintaining connections with other people during a time of increased isolation due to technology. And what I found is when I go into these massive companies, whether it's in Silicon Valley or New York City or in Los Angeles and I just bring people together as a large group and I create the listening context in which people can share stories. People enter into a state of euphoria, they enter a state of bliss that just comes from the very basic capacity to connect with one another. We are social beings. We are craving this connection. We're craving it. And if you create those context and you make those bounded by time and space, therefore creating a kind of a safe environment, people will show up and they will give up their best because we all wanting that kind of ritual space in our lives.

KL: 25:46

Yeah, absolutely. Okay, so we're coming close to the end and I am going to ask you for a 'Yes, And' story which is how we end every podcast. But I have two other items from your book that I want to quickly sort of hit on because they were very interesting to me. One is you write quote, change means letting go of old stories and creating new ones are finding new ways to tell a story. So at what point, because you know, you've crafted your story, you've, you've followed the rules, you have an amazing story. How do we know when it's time to let go of that story?

MN: 26:17

Well, your story is not only your way of shaping your world and shaping your life. Your story also shapes your life, right? So once you've told a story, let's say you've told a story about your business, the future of your business, and you say, well, you know, my business is sure to fail because we haven't yet started designed an app. So you have created a future which is a future of failure, right? And you've convinced yourself a thousand different ways that the individual story is correct, that you have not designed an app and you're going to be behind the curve. Well, you could just as well create a completely different ending to your story that shows how you are working with researchers to create that app. So really how we end our story, how we resolve whatever conflict we've got going is crucial in terms of how our outcomes are going to turn out.

KL 27:24

That's really interesting because what I'm also hearing is that if you can make your story dynamic not static, that there's always a next chapter. You are going to put yourself in a framing that allows you to innovate and think divergently and all the things that can get in the way of you know, it's the reason that really great businesses don't go on is because they just sort of stop and stop inventing.

MN: 28:00

And your 'Yes, And' analogy is absolutely perfect. Ending of your story is the most important part of your story. You need to know where you're going. You need to know what your destination is. Just as the pilot of a plane needs to know what their destination is and when you're telling a story, you need to know your destination. That's what gives your story it's direction. Now, if you're in a business or you're trying to enroll someone in participating in an enterprise of yours, the end of your story has to involve some kind of invitation ride you've lifted on a positive note. You've lifted on a note with it is possibility and opportunity so that the person can then step in



and say, and this is how I participate. That's what a business story is. It's giving someone an opportunity to participate and that has to be something that is positive. You know, it. If you end on a note of failure, there's no way for somebody to join your story.

KL: 29:04

Yep. One of the thing I want to touch on before the story is, we have a phrase when we're creating our sketch comedy, which we develop out of improvisation, which is start in the middle. Uh, so the idea there is you do not want to load up everyone with a bunch of exposition and description because you know, the either going to get bored, but if you can find a way to kind of start in the middle, it is amazing how quickly people can sort of figure out where you're going. And you kind of talk about this, where you say with your first line- you can choose to drop us right In the middle of the action.

MN: 29:41

That's right and what's so incredible about stories, right? Is that if you tell a story, you know, if I tell you a story and I said to you, I was standing at Johannesburg International airport saying goodbye to my parents, and my mother said to me, Marie, you're going to live in New York City. Please be careful of AIDS. You're a gay man, and I'm very worried about you, well, you don't have to know anything and I've dropped you into the middle of an action and you're down. Knows so much about me just from having been dropped into the middle of that action. You don't need a whole lot of context. So what I also say is that the best way to find that middle of your story is go for the emotional turning point. You know when you're wanting to tell a story and you're looking to tell a story that's going to make an impact. Look at the high and low points of your life. You know, look at those moments of greatest emotion because that's going to tell you where the stories live. And that's generally the middle of the story. So once you've pointed out that part, that emotional turning point, then you can figure out, well, how am I going to begin this story and how I going to, how am I going to end up resolving that emotional turning point?

KL: 30:54

We ask every guest who comes on the podcast to give us their own 'Yes, And' story. So this is the principle of improvisation, which is when groups of people are getting together to make something out of nothing, they achieve nothing. If they say no and they can't say yes, but they have to say yes. And, and this is something we know about ourselves a lot. We know ourselves,



and I have found that most of the guests do have a moment where they've, yes, anded themselves and made some sort of a personal professional discovery. So I'm wondering if you have one of those stories for us.

MN: 31:23 How long do I have?

KL: 31:25 As long as you want!

MN: 31:28 It's 1974 in Johannesburg, South Africa and the teacher says to

the class, turn to the person next to you until one another's story. And Paul tells me a story we're both 12 years old, right? And then he tells me a story and then he says to me, Murray tell me a story and I say, well, you know, I really didn't have one, and he says to really just anything come and surely you must have a story. And I say, well, you know, no, I really don't have a story anyway. Paul is not one of the people who teases me and mocks me every day and calls me a fag and so you can only imagine my surprise when we're in the second to last year of high school and the teacher can't control the class. And she herds out of the classroom and she says, boys on the left and girls on the right and Paul says and Murray in the middle and I'd just go completely red from top to toe, you know.

32:26 And the entire class bursts into laughter. And I never speak to

Paul again. We go in onto the university campus. I'm studying psychology, he's studying medicine. He tries to greet me on the campus because now become of the cool guys you know and I just ignore him. Flash forward 15 years, I arrived in New York City to be a playwright and I'm looking for someone to direct my play and I meet a French Canadian director by the name of Seymour and Seymour says to me do you by any chance to my boyfriend and I say, who would that be? Any says it's Paul Brody. Same Guy from 15 years later. There I am and the lobby of the knitting factory in New York City in their black box theater and just this guy from high school standing next to me says to

me, Murray, I don't know if you remember what happened all

dying of AIDS. It's a death sentence. And here's this guy who

those years ago at school.

And I said, yes I do. I remember how you said Murray in the middle. And he said to me, I am so sorry. It's been haunting me all these years. Six weeks later Paul reveals to me that he is HIV positive; now this year with 1990 and people are dying of HIV

Narativ 212-268-4200 Contact@narativ.com should have been my best friend at school because both of us were gay and all of a sudden we're telling one another stories. We listening to one another. We're in New York City and I'm just facing the prospect of him dying. Anyhow, one day Paul and I have a large argument, a large argument about who's right it is to tell a story. Do I have the right to speak about him being HIV positive? Does he have the right to talk about people in my life and we're going at one another with screaming and shouting and all of a sudden Paul says to me, Hey Murray, how about we present this argument publicly?

How about we actually go onto a stage and have this argument in front of an audience? I said, really, are you serious? He gets, as a matter of fact, I've just applied to go to a conference in Montreal for family therapists. Why don't we present our argument at that conference? And that in fact turned out to be the genesis of a performance which was called Two Men Talking, which pulled and I have prevented all around the world and it has a live improvised storytelling performance in which we tell the story of our friends, including the details that I've just mentioned to you. And so that was an opportunity to say yes to something that seems a little odd to me at the time and it led to some of the most incredible experiences I've ever had in my life, you know, including performing to mentor, working on the West End in London. So that's my 'yes, and' story.

That's a great story. The book is called Powered By Storytelling. And Murray, thank you for coming on the show.

MN 35:17 Thank you so much. This was such fun.

35:11

KL:



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