

Eric McNulty: [00:37](#) Welcome to the latest edition. I'm your host, Eric McNulty, and my guest today is Dr. Murray Nossel and our topic is storytelling. One of the more frequent concerns I hear from NPLI participants, if the media fails to quote unquote tell our story wasn't in the aftermath of a human or manmade disaster. It seems like government responses are inefficient, inapt and at times uncaring. That doesn't reflect the people I know. And so when I saw Dr. Nossel's book, *Powered By Storytelling*, I knew he would have valuable insights to share. Dr. Nossel has been helping organizations craft present stories for more than 30 years. His firm his Narativ. That's one r and no E. If you're looking for on the web and its client include everyone from the Walt Disney company to Unicef. He's an Oscar nominated documentary film maker and a co-star of a storytelling performance called Two Men Talking that has been onstage in Edinburgh, London and New York. He's a fascinating individual with a lot of the teachings about stories and why they're so important. Dr. Murray Nossel, welcome to Leader ReadyCast.

Murray Nossel: [01:42](#) Well, thanks so much for having me, Eric. It's a pleasure to be here today.

EM: [01:47](#) I'm really looking forward to what you have to say because I think this is a really important and compelling topic both within the organizations who are listening to this, but also as they engage external audiences as well, and I want us to start at the beginning. What do you mean by story and why are stories so central to healing communication?

MN: [02:08](#) Our species evolved to tell stories. Stories for us humans, are things that are hard wired into our brains and why. Why did the brain evolve to be the storytelling brain? Why are human beings Homo-Narrans, the species that speaks, that tells stories? Well, storytelling is crucial to our survival. If you think about our earliest ancestors and what it took for our earliest ancestors to survive, it was the capacity to be able to trance third survival related information from one generation to the next. Now I had the great opportunity to be able to discuss this subject with one of South Africa's world leading paleoanthropologists who was involved in the discovery of some of the first remains of our human species in east Africa. His name was professor Phillip Tobias and I said to him, professor, Tobias, how far does storytelling go back in our human species and you know, I was thinking about those cave paintings in France with 35,000 years ago.

[03:30](#) Human beings, we're depicting the stories of the hunt on, on the walls of the caves, and professor Tobias just laughed at me

and he said, no. Storytelling goes back millions of years in the human species. From the earliest incarnations of our species. We had to communicate survival related information to our next of kin. We had to communicate weather patterns. What would happen if it would rain? How do you find shelter in a cave? Which animals are dangerous, which animals aren't dangerous? How do you find the certain kinds of rocks that are going to. You're going to be using the tools. What about how to communicate, how to cross a river, you know that. So even before we had the language as we know it at this moment in time, we had somehow to communicate to our next of kin what they needed to do in the case of crisis, in the case of danger, in the case of emergency.

[04:30](#)

So this function is part of our survival as a species. That's why it's in our brains as hardwired function. But there's another thing to, Eric, and maybe very also relevant to what you're talking about and, and what you're interested in. And that is that stories are a way of creating coherence of the seemingly random events that our lives consist of. So if you think about human experience, I mean we just live our lives and stuff happened, right? And we need to be able to explain to ourselves what's going on. We need to create a logical sequence that helps us understand why things are happening in our lives and story has that function as well. It helps us to organize our experience, make sense of our experience, find coherence out of our experience. So I would say that, to answer your question then about you know, why story is the most powerful way of communicating.

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I would say it's because we are deeply resonating. When we hear stories as human beings. There's something about hearing somebody else's story that touches me at a very profound level and I do just want to say that what I mean when I talk about story telling is a sequence of events that has a beginning, a middle, which I would call it some kind of turning point, some kind of emotional turning point and an end. And that a story is also a sequence of events that happened. Stories are not interpretations. They're not commentaries. They are not judgments, they're not opinions. Stories are accounts of things that could be seen, smelled, tasted, touched and heard.

EM:

[06:31](#)

That's really interesting. (you made) A number of really important points. I want to stop for a moment and talk about this notion of coherence because of research that I have read and you likely have. This well says that humans can't function without a coherent worldview. It creates a frame in which they make sense of what's happening around them and without that,

whether it's right or wrong, as a matter of people have to have something where things make sense and without that we just can't process all the information that comes at us and so a key element of storytelling in the midst of where the immediate aftermath of a disaster is that you've been thrown from coherence where the world made sense into a world that may seem incoherent because of the dramatic shift that has happened after a terror attack or a hurricane or whatever it happens to be and that you're looking for something that can restore coherence and that doesn't just mean the facts, a spewing of facts by officials, but something that's a concrete narrative in which the world begins to make sense. Again. Is that, is that accurate?

MN:

[07:42](#)

Yes, yes. That makes tremendous sense to me, so you know, one of the words that just coming into my mind right now is the word resilience, right? So how in fact do we recover from those kinds of things? How do we recover from those traumas and we need to be able to not only make sense of it is the thing that has happened, but we also need to be able to create a present for ourselves and a future in which we can go on living. So there's something about creating a coherent narrative in the face of a crisis or an emergency or disaster where that narrative has to take care of explaining what has happened to some degree and also creating some kind of pause forward. And you know, I've been for the past 14 years now when you are talking about that idea right? Which I think you mentioned there in your introduction, which is like who are the people who are representing these traumas? Who are our narrativizing it for the general public? I think that it's incumbent on those people to not only relate what has happened, but also to inspire people to be able to carry on. I mean, that's what leadership really is all about. It's not just about a delivery of facts. It's about creating a context which explains which creates coherence and which provides hope.

EM:

[09:23](#)

The classic example there is Churchill in England during World War Two, when we see a lot of events of recent spate of movies about his life that on a rational basis he had no basis for asserting that England would triumph over the forces of Nazi Germany. They didn't have planes, ships the people, but his narrative inspiring people to do more than they thought possible and to keep going in the midst of tremendous adversity. And I think more recently we think of people who live, who's messages endured (for example) George W Bush after 9/11, President Obama after the Boston marathon bombings. Again, these weren't recitations of facts. They were

emotional stories of strength and resilience and endurance that motivated people to see a hopeful future.

MN:

[10:15](#)

And I would go one step further. So it's not only what Winston Churchill, President Bush, President Obama were saying, it's how they were being when they were saying that; it's the presence that they wrote to communicating their message. So one of the things about storytelling is that you know that it's being effective when it calls the teller into a particular way of being. When I am sharing a story with you, it animates my imagination. I have to go back over the events and talk about them and describe them in such a way that they are coherent for you and that they are giving you a sense of hope and possibility. So what that does to the performance of this story is that it animates it. It, it brings the spirit into it. And I would say that Churchill was, when he was delivering those messages, is just as important as what he was saying.

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It was the confidence that he was bringing to his message. So that's part and part of what I also mean by storytelling is that you are having to excavate that story. You're having to find out what story you are going to tell and you have to really know what message you want to communicate first, why are you telling a story right now? You have to know what your message is and why you're going to use a story to communicate that message and why now, why is this the moment to tell that story? What is the urgency, what's calling you to action, and what is the call to action that you bring into your listeners and these things have to be very, very clear in your excavation process of what story you're going to tell, and then you craft your story to be tight and only contain those elements that are really central.

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And then ultimately it is the presentation of that story, the performance of that story that's going to make all the difference. That is what I call the storytellers lions gaze. You know when you throw a ball to a dog, the dog keeps its eye on the ball, but when you throw a ball to a lion, the lion keeps its gaze on you. As storytellers, our gaze is on our audience. We want to connect with our listeners and we want to do everything that we can to ignite the minds and hearts of our listeners and I think that's what the presidents and Churchill, whom you mentioned earlier, that's what they were able to do in those periods of time.

EM:

[13:00](#)

We've talked a lot so far about the speaking or the output side of storytelling, but in your book you say it all starts with

listening. It starts with input. Why? Why don't you start with listening?

MN:

[13:14](#)

Well, let's go back to our early origins again of the human species. Why did we initially start to speak to, to really want to relate to our experiences, to other people? Now professor Tobias, the Paleoanthropologist I spoke to in South Africa said to me, you know, Murray, that before human beings could speak, we could sing. I said, how does that come to be? And he said, well, we are imitating the sounds of the animal. So the first thing is that we wanted to do was to imitate the sounds of maybe dangerous animals like lions and bears and other kinds of dangerous beasts, but also from this early stage in our development as humans. We were captivated by the beauty of the bird and we wanted to repeat their songs. So where did the storytelling stuff? It started with listening. It started with our abilities to actually listen, to perceive our environments and then to want to communicate what it is that we had heard.

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So for me, listening is crucial to storyteller Eric, even though I can't see you right now and you're in Boston and I'm in New York City, there's already enough of a relationship that you and I have developed through our back and forth that I can get a sense of how you're listening to me. Maybe it through the questions that you're asking. Maybe it's through your tone of voice. Maybe it's even the fact that I'm talking right now and you don't interrupt me. You know, you let me finish my thoughts and so I realize that you're listening is central to what I'm saying right now, so I like to think of listening as a bowl and telling is like the liquid that poured into the bowl. Now, just as the bowl gives the liquid, its shape, so does listening give storytelling its shape and we can say that there is therefore a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling.

[15:32](#)

So if we go back to Winston Churchill again and we think of why was he so able to communicate with the British people during that time because he knew what mattered to them. It started off with his ability to listen to his audience, which has a very strange kind of phenomenon that you think about it because if you think about the Latin root of the word audience, it has audio which means listening, and so when you're listening to your audience, it literally means that you are listening to the listening, right? You're listening to WHO's listening to you so that when you tell your story, you are connecting to those people and listening. That's your lions gaze. So if you are a leader of a community or a city or even a country and it's a terrible crisis like a hurricane has happened all at the moment, we've got these terrible fires raging on the west coast of the

United States. You know, just to be able to stand up there until people, the facts is not communicating what people need to be hearing at that moment. They're in a state of fear, they're in a state of panic. They want to know that things are going to get better, you know, so that's where storytelling becomes so incredibly important. We want to reach where people are listening at the most deep levels.

EM:

[17:08](#)

This brings me to another point in our business. We think of the incident, we call it boom. So whether the boom is a tornado or a bomb or whatever it happened to be, that's the incident. And it seems to me that this listening and thinking about story needs to start far less far before the incident that you can be listening to stakeholders, to the environment and understanding what people care about. That can all happen in periods of calm. Whereas I think leaders often think of the narrative begins with the incident at boom, but it's really much part of a much larger narrative arc, isn't it? There's a context in which that incident comes and then the story that emerges, it is part of a larger community story.

MN:

[17:54](#)

Most certainly, Eric. I mean if you think about the formula that I presented was storytelling right at the beginning of our conversation here. I said to you that every story has a beginning. It has to have an emotional turning point and it has to have an index. Right, and the ending is the resolution of what the emotional turning point is. Now if you think about a hurricane or 9/11 or a fire or a terror attack, you are actually talking there about the emotional turning point. That's when things are churning with emotion. So the beginning of the story has to proceed that emotional turning point and to be able to create that context that allows us to understand the emotional turning point. So yes, the beginning of the story has to happen before what you calling them, boom moment. Also, if you're just listening to people during the actual crisis, during the actual emergency, you are listening to them in a highly activated state, which is likely to be charged by a great deal of fear and uncertainty, so you're getting a very skewed idea of how those people are actually listening.

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You're getting a very skewed idea of what's actually important to those people, so how could you possibly know what to say to them in that environment? So yes, your relationship with your stakeholders, with your communities, with your view of the president or the prime minister or whatever, you need to understand who your people are wrong. The get go so that when something happens, and let's face it, we are a human species. We are vulnerable. Something is going to happen. You

need to be ready for that moment. You got to be prepared and being prepared means understanding who you're talking to.

EM: [19:59](#) Well it brings out the importance of building relationships in advance of the relationship between our police force and its community. For example, is it positive, neutral? Is it negative before something happens that will help determine whether the.... When you get to boom, do the officials and the community move in synchrony together or they begin to move in opposition and a lot of the seeds for that are sewn before anything ever happens

MN: [20:32](#) Police are a marvelous example. Police are there to protect the community. Police are there as our partners in creating a society that is safe and organized, and that is the role of the police for me is to join with the community and to allow the community to feel protected and safe. Now, there is a tremendous ground swell of narrative in the United States because of things that have happened where the police are not seen as and not seen as protecting community. They seen as hostile and the gratuitously aggressive in some situations and so what you've got there as a kind of a dominant narrative that starts to develop about the police and so it then becomes incumbent on the large majority of the police force who are not behaving in those particular ways to create some kind of counter narrative. And the way to create that counter narrative is to develop relationships with their communities. Once again, listen to the community's stories here....

[21:45](#) Hear what's important to the communities and then be able to tell the story of how they have been helpful and how the police have in many senses created that sense of safety and that sense of protectiveness in their communities and maybe a police particularly when they've been into situations where they have done their very best to protect the group and have nonetheless been criticized and demonize and they feel tremendously hurt. And then when they are interviewed on TV, on the radio, they become defensive and maybe they even become angry because that's not the way that they were. Well, this is where storytelling really comes into its power. Where it really comes into its own because of those people in those circumstances can actually prepare themselves with a narrative that shows what they did. Any screenwriter is going to tell you that storytelling is all about showing and it's not about telling.

[22:52](#) So for people to go out there and say, we are, you know, we're out there to protect you and you don't respect us. And you know, all those kinds of things. That doesn't really work because

you're just lecturing to people, you're just preaching to people, but if you can think of, actual factual examples of things that you have done which show how much you care about your community, how much you've listened to your community. That's when people will really trust you and that's how you're going to change those narrative. Also makes me think of something else, and that is if you are talking to people who are hostile and reactive, you cannot go in straight away and tell them your story. You can't present that alternative narrative and until you've given them a chance to release the obstacles they have to listening to you.

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Right? So in order to create an optimal listening situation, because remember that our stories depend on our listening you first have to make sure that those people can listen, and what that requires often is giving them the opportunity to vent. Okay? All right. Listen, I want to tell you a story now about what I've done, the work that I've done on the police force. Now I know that you're probably not ready to listen to my story because you've got so many pent up and built up feelings, so I essentially just want to listen to what's in your mind. What are your assumptions? What are your preconceptions? I'm not going to interrupt you. I'm not going to judge anything that you say now. Just let me hear your preconceptions. I will just listen as openly as I possibly can. So if you really allow people to so called clear out this vessel of listening so that it's open. That's when your stories have the most chance of landing and making a difference. So that's part of listening to your audience is that when they are activated and when they are highly reactive with emotions, you need to be able to give them the chance to say what's happening for them.

EM:

[25:11](#)

I recall terrible who's one of our alumni and one of our faculty now who was the deputy commander during deepwater horizon and his job was very much behind the scenes and was going to Congress and governors and local officials and again trying to build that positive narrative of the response and he never refers to those 70 some odd days. Summer of getting yelled at and again he realized that that part of his job was getting yelled at. It was not personal. It wasn't him. the person happened to be in that position and if it had been somebody else, they'd be getting yelled at too. But that a key part of being able to tell your story was making sure that you actually heard and as you say, I love the phrase you use, removing the obstacles to listening both your own and that of the people with whom you hope to communicate.



[26:02](#)

So actually the listening can take place and therefore the storytelling can stick. So I think that that notion of removing obstacles to listening is really, really critical. Now something else pops into my mind and I listened to you and it's that much like we always say, you don't want to exchange business cards in the middle of a disaster, nor do you want to pull out this podcast in the middle of a disaster and say, oh, let me figure out how to tell a story. This really should start much earlier and what I'm thinking is that as much as we focus on external audiences, there's a lot of storytelling that can be done in practice internally as well. And again, our day to day job is working with our teams, working with organizations, working across organizational boundaries and do you think through your work, if you helped create what are essentially storytelling cultures or storytelling organizations where this becomes baked into how you communicate and therefore when you need it in the midst of a crisis, it is something that comes that emerges naturally. It isn't that you have to go find the binder with the five tips that Murray gave you on how to tell a story. So have you actually helped build storytelling cultures and how do you do that?

MN:

[27:15](#)

So that's spot on, Eric. The process of creating a story in the time of a crisis has to happen long before the crisis happened and yes, I really believe in the ripple effect. You know, you have to clean up your own home before you can criticize anyone else's home and it's the same thing with storytelling. You need to know and be ready with your story before the crisis or the trauma or the emergency actually happens and what better place to develop that story than in your community than in your work place, because any community, any workplace, any institution that's worth its weight in gold has to have some kind of vision, has to have some kind of mission. They have to know what they are about, why do we exist, and every single person in that organization needs to have their own personal story of that vision of that mission. Then need to be able to speak it so that they can move other people in the role of the people call other people to action.

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So I believe that the only way to do this is from the inside out. You must start within your organization and you must create your organization as a listening and storytelling culture. I'll just give you an example that comes to my mind immediately because it's the most recent culture that I've helped to build and this is a Drug Detox Center that has just opened right here in New York City now before they actually even opened their doors to patients. Now remember that patients are coming into this, into the center in a high degree of reactivity. They all have

to detox from alcohol and drugs, so the staff need to be ready and prepared to deal with that situation, which is going to be a constant state of crisis. So the director of this clinic, very smart, brings me months before the clinic opens its doors and he says, I want you to train us now to listen to one another and to share stories right now so that we are in the midst of that crisis.

[29:37](#)

We know not to be reactive and we can actually be responsive. Just like that gentleman that you mentioned from the deep water horizon who went around and was yelled at for 70 days in a row. Why? Because he, he knew what he was about. He knew what his story was. He knew what his mission was so that when people have yelled at him, he was able to maintain his sense of purpose, maintained his sense of direction. Now I need to be able to wake you up in the middle of the night and you need to be able to tell me the story of who you are and what you do and why you do that. Now I, I'd be really quite happy to tell you my story right now of why I do what I do and that I hope would communicate to you why you need to be prepared to tell your story and why you cannot make it up in that moment.

EM:

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Please go ahead. I would love to hear that.

MN:

30:49

So Eric, my story begins actually in 1990 and I had waved goodbye to my parents at Johannesburg International Airport. And the first thing that my mother said to me, Oh, I should say the last thing that my mother said to me because they were the same, and she said to me, darling, your off to New York City, please be careful. Remember that AIDS is killing people now. I had come out as a gay man. I'm off to New York City. I'm living in the middle of Greenwich Village, which is the gay capital of the world. And every time I walk out of my apartment, I noticed young men my own age and younger and they're dying and nothing is working because there aren't medications yet. And so we've got here a national emergency of people dying now. I needed to get a job. I'd come to New York to be a playwright and I wasn't making any money.

[31:35](#)

And by 1994 I was in the school of social work at Columbia University doing my phd. Why? Because I didn't want to be a psychologist anymore. I wasn't interested so much in helping individuals. I really wanted to work at the communal level. I wonder to see how to change entire communities. I ended up working in an AIDS program. I went down the steps of this, program in Brooklyn and there was a skull and cross bones on the door with a laboratory specimen box on it had actually said

dangerous hazardous human waste material. That's what greeted you when you walked into this AIDS program. And my supervisor said to me, Murray your job is to help the patients in this program come to terms with the fact that they are dying now. They were dying. I mean, you know, again, the medications hadn't been invented yet that would completely change the face of the AIDS epidemic.

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And so here I am talking to my first patient and I said to her, well, you know, how does it feel to have AIDS? And She just screams me. And she says, well, I've kind of dumb question. Is that, how does it feel? How would you feel if you knew you might be dead in two weeks Murray? I went back to my supervisor and I said, well, you know, these patients are noncompliant. I mean, they've got no insight. And he said to me, well, that's because you're imposing your viewpoints as a clinical psychologist onto those patients. You're not a clinical psychologist anymore Murray. You have to meet these people where they are. Essentially, you have to listen to them, listen to what's important to them, not what's important to you. So indeed I did. I went out into the program and I sat in the patient lounge and what did I notice that every two or three days over the intercom name, the name of someone who had just died and all the patients would quickly accumulate in the lounge and a few words would be exchanged about their person who died.

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And then everyone went on with their day. And then I noticed that two days later the person's belongings would be showing up in the secretary's office and a black garbage bag. And no one came to claim those bags. And so it wasn't only that people were dying and the post leaving nothing and no one behind, but those people who were still alive so that that's what was going to become of them when they died. And so I realized that the only thing that I could offer these people was the opportunity to tell this story, that they could leave something of themselves behind and that those of us who were still living in the future would carry those stories with us. And so one person came into my very first storytelling and listening group and she went out into the lounge again and said, oh, you know that Guy Murray, he might be a white South African who grew up under apartheid, but you can still trust him.

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And by Christmas of 1994, my listening and storytelling group was filled with people who knew they were going to die and wanted to leave these stories behind. But the most important part of this is that in early 1995 when the legislators in New York, were threatening cutbacks to people with AIDS, my patients got onto a bus and they left video tapes of their stories

on the desks of the legislators. And they said to those legislators. You listen to my story. You listen to what has happened to me, what it's like to be me. And then you tell me that I don't deserve services, and it's on the basis of those stories, not just the stories of my patients, but all the people with AIDS who were telling their stories in the United States across the world. That's what changed the face of that epidemic and that's how a movement was created.

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So once again, it was in that moment when I was at that crisis of what can I do in this situation? People are dying. I can't stop them from dying. What can I offer them in that moment? It was the ability to listen to them and invite them to tell their stories. That's what made the difference. So for the leaders that you talking about, it's not just about delivering their message and their story, it's also about giving people the opportunity to tell their stories and to say what it's like for them. That is how you build trust.

EM:

[36:05](#)

What a powerful message. What a powerful story and a great example of everything we've talked about today. So as we close, I would challenge the listeners to answer for themselves a question, we often ask people in our programs, which is why do you lead and some people we asked to have a story and they can talk about being the surviving child after father dies and needed to step up and take care of the family or some other experience that pulls forward and others or just thinking about it for the first time, but I think that's a very powerful question in a way to begin this. There's another in Murray's book *Powered By Storytelling*, which I recommend highly, which he calls telling the grandparent's story and I will let you go to your local bookstore to get a copy of the book and learn more about that and wants to do.

[36:51](#)

Thank Dr. Murray for joining us today on this edition of Leader ReadyCast. He provided some really interesting insights, not just on the importance and meaning of storytelling, but then practical tools on how to excavate a story to craft a story and delivered in a way that has resonance with an audience and it all starts with listening, removing the obstacles to listening you're your own as well as those of your audience, and then connecting. Keeping your lines gaze on the audience as he said. You can learn much more about this in Dr. Nossel's book, *Powered By Storytelling: excavate, craft and present stories to transform business communication* available at booksellers nationwide and online as well as on audio available on audible.com. I look forward to having you join us with our next

edition of leader ReadyCast, and until then, when your moment arises, be ready to lead. Thank you.