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STORY

A STORY ABOUT STORYTELLING

sailing

BY DAVID BRICKER, MFA



The delicious aroma of baking bread filled the schooner's cabin. Captain Strider passed out wineglasses. "Today's sailing adventures are perfect lead-ins to a discussion about what stories are and how they work," he said. "I use a 'four elements' model I call 'StorySailing.'"

"Every story has two horizontal elements—conflict and transformation. Cinderella must escape from her evil stepmother—the conflict. And she lives happily ever after with the prince—that's the transformation. The conflict usually gets too much attention. Effective storytellers focus on the transformation—on the outcomes."

"Consider Lenore's seasickness." Strider smiled at his guest. "Feeling queasy wasn't fun, but your story had an easy-to-define conflict—you wanted to avoid throwing up—and what *seems* like an easy-to-define transformation—you felt better after I taped the beans to your wrists."

"That in itself is not a story—a factual recounting of events is an anecdote—but Lenore is a scientist. 'Magic beans' don't harmonize with her study of how the gears of the universe mesh. Lenore's skepticism—what makes her an effective researcher—lost a wrestling match to a pair of beans. I'm sure Lenore thinks there's a scientific explanation—even *I* think there is—but she now lives in a world of expanded possibilities. That's the *meaningful* transformation."

Vincent nodded. "What blew *me* away is that Lenore came back aboard with the exact part you needed to fix the boat. What are the odds?"

"Truth is stranger than fiction," added Kaitlin. "If I wrote that in a novel, readers would never accept it as plausible."

Strider laughed. "So what are the conflicts in that story?"

Micky Tomm spoke up. "We needed to beat the weather, and at the last minute, we had a mechanical breakdown."

"Exactly," said Strider. "And the transformation?"

"We got here just before the weather got nasty?" proposed Doug.

"What gives an anecdote the gravitas to call itself a story? What's the *meaningful* transformation?"

"Either something *magic* happened or we witnessed an *epic* coincidence," offered Walter. "Whether it was an act of God or a work of Shakespeare accidentally written by the zillionth random monkey, it was remarkable."

Strider smiled. "Stories bring us closer to the Mystery. You don't have to explain *how* acupuncture cures seasickness. You don't need to explain *why* Lenore found an old boat part lying in the grass and stuffed it in her bag an hour before mine broke. The biggest story transformations are transformations of perspective."



“So there are two ‘horizontal’ story forces,” said Micky Tomm. “What are the ‘vertical’ forces? You mentioned magic.”

Strider sliced his hand through the air. “A football team is twenty points behind. Can they throw some long passes and win the game? An undervalued female employee summons the courage to ask for a raise that will align her income with the salaries of her male colleagues. Those are conflicts.

“The transformation may be predictable. The football team may win the game—or they may lose, but let that nerdy kid who’s been warming the bench all season play quarterback. Maybe they discover something more meaningful than pushing a ball down a field. They lose the game but everyone wins. Maybe Gladys gets a raise—or goes home rejected—and then her officemates embarrass the management into paying everyone fairly.

“The ‘horizontal’ motion is the course of the story from conflict to transformation. The ‘vertical’ forces act from above and below the boat. They’re the wind that moves the ship forward and the sea that floats it over the bottom.

“The water that supports the story-boat is *authenticity*. A story is representative in some way of our human search for meaning. It doesn’t have to be true or plausible. The football story isn’t about football. We sometimes get so engrossed in the game of human competition that we fail to find value in people who can’t contribute directly to the team. How many of us were ever rejected because we stunk at sports? How many girls don’t feel pretty enough or worry about looking too smart? Nonconformists and non-competitive kids get benched. When Gladys shows up at work and finds her colleagues standing outside the office with protest signs, the story is authentic because we’ve *all* been treated unfairly at one time or another. We have a sense of justice built into our moral compass. We’ve had to bite our lips for a paycheck or deal with inequity. We can *relate* to the story—even if we’re not athletes or female employees. That’s authenticity. The water—the story—has to be ‘deep’ enough.

“On to magic: Even *fantastic* magic has an important place in storytelling. Cinderella can’t get to the ball. Her fairy godmother turns a pumpkin into a coach and mice into horses. Her shabby dress turns into a gown and a pair of glass stilettos. Off she goes to meet the prince. The story is *utterly implausible*, but Cinderella doesn’t sneak out the window, borrow a gown, summon an Uber, and speed off to the castle ... Why not?”

After a pause, Audrey spoke. “The Cinderella story is not as it appears. As children—especially as teenagers—we want to control our destiny. We want to meet our special prince or

princess and live ‘happily ever after.’ Our slippers aren’t red or sparkly; they’re transparent glass. They’re our ‘walk.’ They represent our unique qualities; they fit only us. The love of our life is someone who sees and appreciates what only *we* have to offer. The Cinderella story is about connection. It’s about realizing our potential. It’s about growing up and finding love.”

“Good. You nailed the authenticity part, Audrey. What about the magic?”

Audrey clapped her hands together. “It’s simple! Cinderella doesn’t escape to the castle using clever strategies. She has a burst of insight—magic. A voice in her head says, ‘I know I’m just a maid with mice for friends and my stepmother is a horrible person. I have a million excuses for not heading out into the world—but *tonight I’m going to go for it!*’”

“Bravo,” said Strider. “Magic is the wind that moves the story-boat along—an invisible, powerful force, a catalyst for transformation. Everyone has some magic power—some unique experience or perspective that can be the wind for someone else’s ship—or their own. Usually, that magic is the real product—not the service or merchandise that’s advertised.

“Summary time, Kaitlin.”

Kaitlin took a breath. “It’s one thing to think about this stuff—to *talk* about stories—but when I verbalize these ideas, I understand them better. Once we go out and navigate and cure seasickness and fix things and race against the weather, we’re *engaging*—we’re *doing*. To be an effective storyteller, you have to make the search for meaning an active, conscious part of your life. You have to *live* to tell the tale.”

Strider placed two steaming loaves on the counter. “Here’s some transformation—but don’t let me interrupt you, Kaitlin. Continue.” He began to cut warm slices of bread.

“Today, we learned a way to visualize how stories work. Stories sail across a sea of conflict toward the safe port of transformation—what’s meaningful to the main characters in the story. Most people focus on conflicts; they talk about data and ingredients and processes but they fail to talk about transformation. They sell the features instead of the benefits.”





"A speaker takes an audience on that same journey," interjected Walter. "We have to understand their conflicts and deliver meaningful transformation."

"And," said Strider, "they probably hire outsiders like you to speak to their own industry experts because you offer some special magic that speeds up that transformation."

Kaitlin nodded her agreement. "If we understand listeners' goals—if our story is *their* story—we connect and inspire. For a story to cross the sea of conflict without running aground, it needs deep water—*authenticity*. Listeners stay on board only if the story is meaningful to *them* ... which is why I hate when my dates talk about themselves all night!"

Audrey laughed. "Yes!"

Kaitlin continued. "Connection happens when our messages are relevant to the people we tell stories to—when we speak *their* language and understand their challenges—when we find the deeper, meaningful goals hidden behind the shallow ones.

The fourth element is the invisible-but-powerful wind that pushes the story-boat: magic. Stories that offer new ways to navigate toward transformation change the way people see their challenges. They're the fairy godmother who shows them the shortcut to grandma's house. Storytellers—writers, designers, scientists, leaders, speakers, teachers—use their magic wind to blow ships from conflict to transformation.

"Authenticity connects the storyteller to the storytellee. Conflict is the why. Transformation is the what. Magic is the how."

Kaitlin raised a finger. "And there's one more piece: Stories are about *people*. Some are about wanderers who don't trust their compass. Some people end up on the rocks because they won't take the wheel and steer. Some get stuck because even when the wind is blowing, they won't put up the sails. There's the accountability story: How many captains—of ships or industry—blame others for what happens aboard *their* ship?

"Conflict, transformation, authenticity, and magic—the four elements—represent the *environment* in which the story takes place—the forces that confront the characters, the degree to which their story is meaningful, and the insights that empower them to grow. The boat represents the resources available to the characters, the choices they make, their power, and their potential."

"And that's StorySailing," said Strider. "Pass the butter, please." ■



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