

Setting up a storycircle...

Everyone is excited about stories today and there are many different models of storycircle around. Our concern here is not with storytelling as a performance, entertaining as that is, but with creating a space in which everyone feels able to contribute. We are also looking for people to tell stories that matter to them in some way.



Stories have always been the ground of culture. Any culture is sustained, nourished and challenged by the stories that matter to its people. Telling our stories to one another is also a vital means by which we come to appreciate the reality of others. As we hear someone's story so we *feel* them to be a person like ourselves, a person with feelings and sensitivity and therefore a person that matters. Stories make relationships and may be a vital means for the rekindling of relational life in our modern, fluid society. Our experience so far is that sharing stories in the way outlined below is enormously exhilarating, accessible to all and may even have the potential to renew our society. One lady, when asked whether she was coming to our next storycircle said, 'If I am not there I will be dead!' That sort of commitment is rare in my experience and suggests we may be on to something. If you try a storycircle along these lines please let us know your experience. We have much to learn and there is much to do!

Where shall we hold it?

A home with a reasonable sized room is ideal. Otherwise go for an interesting venue, definitely not a bare church hall or the like. The venue needs to take between ten and fifteen, the more squashed in the better. Work to make it a pleasant place, perhaps with wall hangings or candles. Provide some appropriate refreshments, maybe wine, juices etc. Offer these as they come in.

Who shall we invite?

Try for a mixed group of people. If a particular local community group is involved, make sure that friends, neighbours or work colleagues are also invited. Part of the excitement is to meet people and hear stories from unexpected quarters.

What shall we say on the invitation?

Invite people to 'Bring a story, any sort of story will do, something from personal life, something for fun, something from your past, or from history, politics, anything, but let it be something that somehow connects with you'. Most rise to this challenge. They find it interesting and they come prepared. If any are particularly hesitant, you might suggest a theme or invite them to bring an object around which they can tell a story. The only rule is that the

story should be told not read. You may also like to invite poems and music to add variety. Make sure people can also come just to listen.

How should we run the evening?

Have one person, maybe you as the host, facilitate the evening. This is an important role. Keep it light hearted. Offer drinks as they arrive. Then when they are settled, select someone to tell a story to lead off. There is often a natural extrovert in the group bursting to tell something. Let them go first, but make sure to keep them to one story. Then invite others, not necessarily round in the circle, but try to respond a little to the flow. Often one story provokes another and the whole thing develops a dynamic of its own. After an hour, have a break for more drinks. This gives people a chance to chat about what has already been told, affirm one another and let you know if they are still waiting to tell something. Then have another session of telling for say 45 mins. This should be enough to allow everyone who wants to tell a story to have their innings. Try not to let anyone go away without taking part if they would like to.

All the way through try to foster an atmosphere where those telling their story are affirmed in some way, particularly with cheers, laughter etc. If someone gets it wrong, goes on too long, reads something etc, it is probably best to ignore it providing it is not hopelessly destructive, and then only be very gentle in your comments. They will probably learn themselves from the example of others what is expected.

How often should we hold a storycircle?

That depends on what you want to achieve by it. Few people are willing these days to turn out to frequent events. They can all too easily feel a burden. You may just want to try a one off evening first. If it is success, then why not repeat it every four to six weeks? This sort of occasional meeting with clear and limited expectations is very popular today. There are thousands of reading groups around the country currently meeting on this sort of basis and providing new grounds for friendship. Storycircles have the advantage of engaging more creatively with our own imaginations, beliefs and values and are not limited to those who like reading books. But some will ask, 'Will we run out of stories?' I suspect the answer to this is 'No'. Once we begin to tap into our story life, we will discover ourselves to be natural storytellers and our lives to be a well of stories. Storycircles may prove to be a genuinely culture forming activity. As we hear the stories of others, as we sense ourselves to be heard, so we will be rebuilding trust, understanding our diversity, and seeking a wholesome vision for life. So why not give it a go?

If you do set up a storycircle along these lines, please let us know. We would love to learn from your experience, be of any help we can in the way of advice, and keep you in touch with other initiatives that AGORA is pioneering to renew the life of our society.

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