

## SECTION 2

# The Power and Science of Storytelling

Telling stories is one of the most powerful means that people have to influence, teach, humanize, inspire, and mobilize. Stories convey messages about our culture, societal conditions, personal history, and the values that unite people. Storytelling creates human connection.

Storytelling is one of our brain's most complex activities. Connecting our most primitive emotional responses with higher order thinking, storytelling enables our ability to learn, grow, and build community. Stories teach us to love, to forgive others, to survive, to be just, and to transform. They can move us to laughter or tears, and they inspire empathy, human connection, and action.

Below is a story shared by educator, storyteller, and co-creator of this workbook, Roxanna Azari, that you can either watch or read. The story is not about sexual violence.

As you are listening or reading the story, think about what you are learning about this person. How? Also, how are you feeling as you follow along? Read the shortened transcript, "On Our Way to Ellis Island" on Page 14. To watch, visit <https://worldchannel.org/episode/sfts-rain-shine/>. Roxy's story begins at 3:22.

**Now that you have watched the video or read the transcript, use the space below to reflect on your experience.**

■ *How did you feel while listening to or reading the story? What thoughts or emotions came up for you? What did you learn about the person? How did you learn that about them?*

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■ *What are the elements of this story that may have moved you or that you believe will stick with you?*

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## A STORY

# On Our Way to Ellis Island

I am working 3 demanding jobs, and tomorrow is Sunday. It's the one day I have all week to myself. All I am daydreaming about is putting my feet up and relaxing when I get home. That's when I get a call from my 85 year old-great-uncle who asks me if I can give his friend a tour of New York City tomorrow. He tells me that his friend is visiting America from Iran for the first time and that it has been his lifelong dream to visit the States. He tells me his friend doesn't speak English, and asks if I would also be his translator. Without hesitation, I say, "Yes of course!"

The next day, I meet his friend and while he is 76, he speaks with eager 5-year-old eyes. He is just so excited – about everything. The air, NYC magnets, public transportation. I kid you not he spoke to me about pigeons. I told him, "Oh my goodness, if you like our pigeons, wait till you see our rats!"

Everywhere we go, I am speaking in Farsi, and I am translating interactions and signs for him. He informs me that it has taken years to obtain his tourist visa, and it has been his dream to see America. Every 2 minutes like clock-work he keeps saying... "You are so lucky to be born here to live here... to be born here!" And one point he brings up the pigeons again and says, "Even your pigeons look more free."

He then asks if we can go see the Statue of Liberty, because he has dreamt of seeing it up close. I tell him "Yes of course, but it is going to rain soon, so we should do it now. The last thing I want is for you to get sick!" And so, we get on this boat to go to Ellis Island. The clouds are looming over us, and there is a couple wearing bright yellow ponchos in front of us and everything feels so beautiful because his joy is so contagious. And on the ferry, he turns to me and passionately declares in Farsi: "I have fallen in love America!"

He asks me if it's okay to take a photo of this moment I say, "Yes, of course but you should do it soon because it is about to rain." He says, "Let me ask! Let me ask! I want to practice my English." I tell him, "Of course, no problem." He leans in towards the couple in front of us, and begins rocking back and forth, as if it's almost his turn to jump rope. He has an accent but its very clear what he is saying, "Exsqkuuz mi"...There's No response..."Exsqkuuz mi" No response..... "Exsqkuuz mi?"....and I am sitting here thinking okay maybe they don't hear him or understand him. I chime in with my American tongue, "Excuse me, Sir? Would you mind ta-" Before I can even finish my sentence the man's wife twitches her neck and her husband snatches her arm, and in a stern, mid-western accent warns her: "Don't help them."

The silence that takes over my body feels piercing. My heart is somehow both shattered and numb all in the same moment. At this point it is raining, which is ironically convenient because it supports me in successfully hiding that tears are streaming down my face. All I keep thinking is how can I translate this moment to this man who literally just spent the last two hours going on about how he is in love with America. How do I tell him that this same America that he loves doesn't love him back? As I am bracing myself, he turns to me with a huge smile and he asks, "What did they say?" And another tear falls. Without me saying a single word, he knows. Hatred doesn't need translation.

He somberly puts his head down, and it's the first moment in our meeting that I don't see the smile that has felt like home the whole day. He then suddenly jolts up, looks at me, and says, "Look there it is! The Statue of Liberty! Come come! Let's just take a selfie!" He literally uses the word "selfie" which I had no idea had traveled to Iran. As we are taking the selfie, another couple approaches us and asks if we need a hand with the photo. Before I can say anything, he is already on it, jumping up and down with a huge smile, "YES PHOTO! Please! Thank you!" Then he motions with his hands if he can take a photo for them. And they understand him. Without him saying a word they understand him. It was as though love also doesn't need a translation.

As he takes their picture, he turns to me and in Farsi he says, "You mustn't let people like that get to you. There is still beauty in the world."

Great. Keep these reflections in mind as you will need them in the next section.

***NOW, IT'S YOUR TURN TO WRITE A STORY.***

Take a moment to brainstorm one of the following:

- \* A time you had an unexpected adventure
- \* A time you tried something new
- \* A time you couldn't stop laughing
- \* A moment with your first crush
- \* A moment you were brave

**Got your story? Write it in as much detail as possible here:**

*Who were you with? What were you doing? What was being said? Where were you?*

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**Great work. Now that you have written out your story, answer the following questions:**

*How did you feel listening to or reading the other person's story? How did you feel while writing your own?*

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Keep your experiences in the forefront of your mind, as you read about the science of storytelling.

### **The Science of Storytelling**

What is happening in our brains when we tell and listen or read stories? Neuroscience studies reveal that when we tell stories, three brain processes engage at once:\*

1. Memories get accessed.
2. Emotions come alive.
3. The desire to act is ignited.

**But the most powerful part?** The same three things happen in our brains as we listen to or read someone else's story. Our brains are constantly searching for ways to connect with other people through storytelling. Neuroscientists call this process "mental mirroring." While sharing or listening to stories, brain chemicals—like cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin—are also released that assist with formulating memories, regulating our emotions, and building empathy. It's as if stories give us a little positive jolt to our systems.

And, while that is all going on at a deep, intuitive level, storytelling is also working with your rational brain, helping you make sense and meaning out of new situations. It is through story that we form and examine our own beliefs, as well as figure out how they correlate with the truths and beliefs of others. Through listening to others' stories, we gain new perspectives and a better understanding of the world around us. We challenge and expand our own perceptions by exploring how others see and understand the world.

**Storytelling sparks action.** When we are working with stories of sexual violence, it's important to think about the kind of action we want to inspire (if any) when sharing our stories. Some of you may have come to this workbook for catharsis and healing, others may be trying to piece together your trauma, while some may be here to learn how to share your story to spark political, social, or personal change. Whatever your goals may be, storytelling can help you to trust your own voice and advocate for yourself.

**We are all made up of stories and memories.** The stories we tell ourselves shape our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us. Our stories have the power to support our recovery and healing or to deepen our pain and trauma. Throughout this workbook, you will have several spaces to work on reframing the stories you tell yourself while keeping in mind that our stories can have a significant impact on our self-beliefs and self-confidence.

Many of you may not have had the space to write or share your stories about sexual violence, abuse or harassment on your own terms. Perhaps you've never had the chance to tell the full story of what you experienced and how it impacted you in the way that you wanted to tell it.

\*Based on Dr. Carol Barash's review of neuroscience studies in her founding of Story2, a leading storytelling company that has helped hundreds of thousands of students and professionals tell their stories. Story2 bases their platform on extensive research about the power and science of storytelling.

## **THIS WORKBOOK IS YOUR SPACE AND NO ONE ELSE'S.**

The following exercise is a space for you to examine the stories that may have shaped you, but that are not authentic to you.

What stories about your experience of gender-based or sexual violence have shaped you or your past? What are the stories that don't feel authentic to you? What are the stories you want to release?

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What are some of the parts of your story you wanted to share but have never been able to? Or what parts of your story do you feel that you don't want to share?

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### **Explore**

- \* *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives Through the Power and Practice of Story* by Christina Baldwin
- \* *Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change Your Life through the Power of Storytelling* by Matthew Dicks
- \* *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make us Human and How to Tell Them Better* by Will Storr
- \* The Moth: The Art and Craft of Storytelling @ [themoth.org](http://themoth.org)
- \* Podcasts and articles @ [storyteller.net](http://storyteller.net)
- \* Story2: Interactive Tools for Building Your Story @ [storybuilder.story2.com](http://storybuilder.story2.com) and [story2.com](http://story2.com)