

# The art of storytelling

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During the first phase of lockdown, I managed to break my arm while trying to keep socially distanced on a busy footpath. It was a clean break to my forearm, just below the elbow — no splint, no surgery, no complications. I was lucky. Earlier this year, my GP tripped on a tree root and broke her elbow into multiple pieces. It involved surgery, a lot of metalware and months of recuperation. Breaking your arm can mean a lot of different things.



Not long after my fall, I was walking with a friend and her three-year-old who was curious about my broken arm. Since we were in-situ out in the street, I demonstrated the tripping over and landing on my arm. I may have been more restrained if I'd realised that his parents would be watching their lad re-enact this for the next two weeks.

My friend sent me a one minute video of her little boy in his scooter helmet telling the story three times over. Initially the narration is hesitant, 'I walk along the road... And what happened?' It gathers force as he demonstrates the moment of tripping, bumping his gumboots decisively at the gutter edge. Then, as if he is taking a bow, he bends at the waist and lowers his helmeted head gently to the asphalt footpath — this moment in the re-enactment lends a dignity to my stumbling face-plant. After the bow the little fellow stands up and with a triumphant flourish extends his arm, pronouncing with great finality 'I broke my arm!' He flinches and holds it close, 'OUCH!'

I felt honoured that this three-year-old took hold of the story so strongly. The quality of his attention was mesmerising to watch. As a colleague observed, it was a 'beautiful example of how children work through disturbances in their lives until they integrate whatever the learning is.'

The three-year-old's mother tells me that storytelling is becoming something of a rite of passage for her boy. Recently, after an episode involving a series of tantrums, he asked her, 'What happened?' She realised this was an invitation to telling about the episode and attempting to get a handle on it. In a continuation of this, when her son recently had a mishap on his scooter, she consoled him with telling how he had crashed when he bumped into a big stick. The story told, he was emboldened to get back on the scooter.

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The capacity to story our experience is a powerful tool for reflection and understanding. As adults we learn that no story is pure and we are capable of telling ourselves spin, but the shaping of experience into story is the bread and butter of our lives. Narrative, it has been said, is a primary act of mind.

My son was almost three when his sister was due to be born. He was bewildered by my absence. When I came home, he was waiting at the front gate, 'Mummy we losed-ed you.'

His baby sister took up residence with many visitors admiring her surprisingly bright blonde hair. Bedtime stories settled into a nightly repetition of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Our firstborn asked for it every night for those first weeks. I realised that the story of the blonde-haired female intruder needed retelling until he'd shooed off Goldilocks enough times to be able to give up his place as the singular baby bear of the family.

The two three-year-olds took hold of the tools for making sense; one by the telling of what happened, the other by adopting a story from the cultural storehouse. Meaning-making is a lifelong task that becomes more nuanced as we age.

Songwriters, poets and musicians bring us narratives wrapped memorably in melody or honed words, which allow us to see our own stories more clearly. They offer ways of naming love and loss, yearning, delight, gut-wrenching fear and hooting hilarity. No matter if they adapt the vernacular or write in elegant prose, we receive the possibility of understanding ourselves in a new light. We may find we are not so alone after all.

It is self-evident that we need diverse artists from the varieties of ethnicity, gender and geography if we are to see our lives reflected in these ways. Songs, poetry and story become a shorthand whereby we integrate our own experience and find a common language. This doesn't replace mental health-care but forms a fabric that connects us to ourselves and others.

Celebrity and commodification can sometimes disguise this process and lead us away from the message to being dazzled by the messenger. But there are artists, song-makers, poets and writers who companion us and enable us to honour our ordinary lives. The best ones know that this is their job, that it is not all about them, but about where the songs or stories or poetry meet the listeners. Their words and melodies free us for the work of making sense of our un-famous lives.

When we understand what artists enable in us, it is no surprise to find outrage at their dismissal by the federal government. Even before the bushfires and COVID-19, the federal government had already started shutting down the arts — rolling the department into a [lumpy bed with transport](#) and infrastructure.

Notwithstanding rescue packages that give a cursory nod, the prevailing message is that artists are surplus to need. While announcing the arts rescue package, the Prime Minister felt compelled to mention the benefit to the tradies, but unable to acknowledge the artists themselves.

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Paul Fletcher, the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts demonstrated once more the side-stepping of established advisory bodies. The Australia Council will be [consulted](#) but not given oversight of the dispersal of the \$250 million arts rescue package. The dispersal of taxpayer funds for the other packages are still in danger of a sports rorts style disbursement.

And in a move that reveals a boxed-in version of what education is for, any young person with ambitions to explore history and philosophy in a humanities education is being made to pay double and simultaneously instructed to train vocationally.

Educating in this way is setting the nation up for an even more gigantic failure of imagination than such policies reveal. We need people with the curriculum vitae that show what they did when they *didn't* get what they wanted — including [good grades](#) — life stories that reveal their resilience and capacity to find another path.

If education teaches that A necessarily leads to B, you won't get that resilience. You'll get narrow minds that say 'What relevance does this have? Is this on the exam? Why should I participate, it's pointless.' The curiosity and inquiry that makes education vibrant gets lost. Occasionally I've taught people with this mindset. You don't want them on the crew when you are sinking.

So let's stop saying we are all in the same boat, because, actually, we're not. We are in the same storm, but most of the artists writers and musicians are on hastily handmade rafts, watching the more valued professions and high end company directors cruise by in the shipping lanes. Meanwhile, the industries that flourish in association with a vibrant arts community are running aground; even if those boats are bigger they're still getting wrecked in the storm. Just as a broken arm can mean more than one thing, a broken economy costs some sectors more dearly than others. When you lose the arts, you lose more than economists can count.

We will always need creativity to open new pathways in the unknowable future.

We need meaningful ways to engage with each other and a curiosity that interrogates our learning. The question is, will the economic measures that are supposed to save us, simply serve to crush us? Thank goodness there are three-year-olds who know better.



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Main image: Cartoon by Fiona Katauskas

Taken from Eureka Street