

# Health Story Collaborative Blog

Harnessing the healing power of stories...

## [How Stories Transform Our Lives: A Conversation with Lani Peterson](#)

by Val Walker



Lani Peterson, Psy.D., Director of the City Mission's Public Voice

Everywhere we look, it seems too many people insist on having the last word—on TV (the election campaigns, the pundits and experts), on Facebook, at our office meetings, at our kitchen tables. We all know how it feels to be trying to tell our story, but some “listeners” must have the last word. Those last-word conversationalists take our message and turn it into theirs. They usurp the meaning of our message before we can even finish our story. We not only feel unheard and unvalued, but downright robbed. We may have cynically concluded we’re living in a last-word culture, so we’re forced to be last-word conversationalists ourselves to survive these days.

This last-word problem has been bugging me, particularly this election year. But thankfully, contributing to Health Story Collaborative has become a way to proclaim the sanctity of telling our stories and having fruitful conversations-- free from last-word conversationalists. Through Health Story Collaborative, I’m fired up about the transformative connection between storyteller and story listener when we go beyond having the last word.

To add a fresh perspective on the topic of going beyond the last word, we’ve invited Lani Peterson to weigh in on how sharing each other’s stories—the telling and the listening-- creates meaning for our lives. We are pleased she could join us.

**Lani is a psychologist, professional storyteller and coach who specializes in the use of story as a healing art and powerful medium for personal growth, connection and change. Drawing on her broad and varied experience with individuals, teams and organizations in the profit and nonprofit worlds, Lani brings a unique combination of personal stories, knowledge of the theory behind stories, and vast experience**

**helping people use stories to transform their understanding of themselves and others.**

**Lani is currently the director of City Mission's Public Voice, currently working with Boston's homeless to tell their stories for healing and social change.**

**Lani's professional training includes a Doctorate in Psychology from William James University, and a Masters in Counseling Psychology from Lesley University. She is a member of the National Speakers Association, the National Storytelling Network, and serves on the Executive Committee of the Healing Story Alliance, which she recently chaired for five years.**

**Perched on a green velvet sofa in Lani's sunny living room in Cambridge, I enjoyed our lively, two-hour conversation chock-full of aha!-moments and astute observations. My mug of coffee was left untouched on her table, as her stories and insights so intrigued me.**

**I'd like to share the highlights of the experiences that have transformed Lani's life as well as the lives of the many people she has touched through her work. To do justice to her wisdom, I'm presenting her "answers" to my questions as inspired stories in their own right.**

**When did you know in your bones that your calling was storytelling?**

**Lani:** Living in Philadelphia in the 90s, I was a psychologist as well as the mother of four young children under the age of six, two of whom were adopted. Trying to balance both my career and family, I worked for a time as a community outreach worker presenting talks on parenting to a wide variety of groups. Although I had completed my doctorate in psychology and was licensed to practice therapy in three states, I had put my private practice on hold. I had worked with clients for nearly ten years, but still wrestled with doubts about whether I had enough knowledge, training or skill to truly help another heal. Self-doubt caused me to relentlessly pursue more reading, training and learning about what practices led to healing, but ironically, the more I learned, the more I doubted my own skill as a healer. Teaching (while simultaneously learning!) parenting skills seemed like the perfect safe road to follow while figuring out what I wanted to do when both my children and I grew up.

One evening, I was invited to speak to an audience of 300 parents on the topic, "Children and Self-Esteem." So there I was in front of this huge room full of people, telling parents about how to foster self-esteem in their children, all the while not clear in my own gut that I had the right stuff myself.

I plowed through my prepared material anyway, and as I concluded my lecture, I invited the audience to ask questions. After many practical questions about child discipline, one woman bravely spoke up and shared some of her story before asking a question. She had come to the US from India after her husband died, hoping to give her son a better life. But sadly, her son was being bullied at school, and she felt helpless to do anything about this. "Do I stay here, or should I go back to India?" she implored. It seemed the whole room felt her confusion and despair.

I knew I had to say something, offer something to her, but none of the theory or literature I had on the subject felt relevant. Somehow, a story came to mind from a much younger time in my own life. Before I started, I let her know, “I don’t know yet why I need to tell you this story, so do with it what you will.” I told her about a time when I was a student at Smith College, and asked to fill in at the last minute to do an interview with the famous poet, Maya Angelou. My roommate, who was scheduled to do the interview, had come down with the flu and asked me to step in in her place. She handed me a list of questions to ask and sent me off. After hearing Maya Angelou speak and share her poetry, all the questions I had with me felt meaningless. So when I finally sat down with Maya Angelou after her performance to interview her, I spoke instead about my own feelings of being lost and confused, seeking out whatever comfort and wisdom she might offer me. Maya took my hand, and said, “Let me tell you right now, dear, there isn’t one right path. It’s all about how you walk on the path you’re on. So, if you fall into a hole, let yourself grieve and cry, and when you climb back out—and you will—you can find your way to dance again.”

As I told my own story of being lost and confused to this woman standing alone in the audience, it felt like we were in a trance, in a deep, one-to-one connection, although the room was filled with 300 people. When finished speaking, I simply uttered, “That’s all I know.” The woman, appearing moved by Maya Angelou’s message, simply said, “Thank you. It is enough.” I watched as the woman left the auditorium that night surrounded by a group of other audience members who appeared to be reaching out to her. I realized that something profound had happened. I realized the act of telling one’s story as well as the act of listening to stories was indeed more than enough to support one on the healing journey. That moment of profound connection between teller and listener provided a revelation for me both professionally and personally: Through stories we can courageously share our vulnerabilities, understand the truth of our experiences, and create new meanings for those experiences. It was a new way of understanding how insight, understanding, and healing could occur.

For me, it was also the moment when I discovered my calling.

**What a moment that was, Lani, a moment of truth if there ever was one. And now, as the person interviewing you, your story about interviewing Maya Angelou certainly speaks to me. There are so many layers to any story, and each time we share it with a different person or group, we find a different meaning or takeaway from it. This leads me to ask you, on a deeper level, what happens between the storyteller and the story listener?**

**Lani:** First of all, we’re all story listeners, even when we hear our own stories. When we speak out loud, our words enter a different part of our brain, the auditory part of our brain, the part of our brain that listens, so we are hearing ourselves in a very different way than when we think only to ourselves. We become a listener to our own story, enabling us to take a different perspective, gain insight and perhaps discover new meaning in what we have said.

**That’s so true, Lani. Maybe that’s why I talk to myself so much when I’m alone! And as a writer, I can see why reading my stuff out loud helps me make sense out of all those words.**

**Lani:** Yes, we can get perspective on the stories we are creating in our heads when we say them out loud, and even more so when we hear other people's reactions to them. People can get stuck in the stories that they keep locked inside their heads, plus they convince themselves that there is only one particular meaning to their story. Life is far too complex for anyone's story to be held hostage to only one meaning.

And because we're all both storytellers and story listeners, we have the potential and ability to free each other from being limited to any one meaning, especially if it is a meaning that brings us pain, limits our potential or keeps us distant from those we love.

Furthermore, when we are able to find new meanings in our stories, we are using additional neural pathways in our brains. In short, by finding alternative meanings in our stories, we can continuously revise and increase our neural paths. Ultimately, healing comes from expanding our relationships to our stories, seeing how our own judgment and self-concept contained in stuck stories might have been holding us back.



**You've worked with so many groups with various socio-economic and cultural differences, and with marginalized people—all with extremely different judgments, self-concepts, beliefs and values. You're enormously accomplished with bringing people together through storytelling and story listening, especially to be advocates for social justice.**

**Lani:** I worked with City Mission Boston to create The Public Voice Project. Although the program was originally created to help recently released prisoners learn public speaking skills to address issues related to reforming the CORI Laws, I found that examining and telling their personal stories led to huge change and growth amongst the participants. I

watched how people could be transformed by building trust over the weeks and opening to explore their more difficult stories. They wrestled with shame and self-blame to gain insight into how their past story came into being, and through that process find self-compassion and compassion for each other. They moved from seeing themselves as either victims or perpetrators, to now being the hero of their story. It was incredibly empowering and healing to own their stories and take responsibility for how they wanted to live the next chapter of their lives.

Since 2004, Public Voice storytelling programs have evolved to train both men and women who have been previously incarcerated, youth at risk, homeless or victims of social inequity. Our storytelling graduates have gone on to speak to lawyers, congressmen, churches and schools. The speakers are able to see firsthand how their stories can make a difference in the lives of others, or bring about change within the community through putting a human face on the issues, raising awareness and motivation to get involved in social change efforts.

Some questions we explore in our storytelling groups include:

Who are you in your story?

What have been your challenges and obstacles? Who has helped you? What are the inner resources, skills and strengths you have relied on to get you through the hard times?

How does your story guide you in your life? Does your current rendition of your story sustain you or constrain you as you try to move forward in your life?  
Who needs to hear your story?

How can you help your audience both hear and understand your story?

What changes (both internally as well as for others) would you like to see happen as a result of telling your story?

**By reaching out and sharing stories with the wider community, not only do participants see that they matter, but they begin to trust that they matter no matter what. You've also worked with healthcare facilities conducting storytelling workshops for providers, patients and families.**

**Lani:** I have brought my story work into several hospital settings, including Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Boston Medical Center, The Greater Baltimore Medical Center and most recently, the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, NY. At the Roswell Park Cancer Institute, I facilitated a story-listening workshop with chaplains, delivered a lunch time lecture on story listening for their medical personnel, as well as worked with the staff who run their Life Recorded Program which had been initially developed by Story Corp. The focus of the Life Recorded Program is to elicit and capture the stories that help patients remember who they are beyond their illness, beyond their identity as a sick person or as a sick person's caregiver. Additionally, Roswell Park supported a healing retreat for cancer survivors and their caregivers to explore their healing journey towards wellness. Over a hundred patients gathered together for a full day of story sharing. Using Joseph Campbell's hero's journey model, they shared their stories of:

Who was I before I became sick?

What have been some of the hardest moments and how did I get through them?

Who helped me that I didn't expect?

Who did I think would help, but they couldn't be there for me?

What have been the external resources I have relied upon to get me through?

What have been the internal resources I have discovered about myself through coping with the hardships on this journey?

Who do I want to thank?

Who do I need to forgive?

Who do I need to ask forgiveness from?

What I am grateful for?

Within my workshops I encourage participants to look at their stories from all different angles, not trying to change their story, but to expand it such that it can hold more of themselves. Patient stories are about so much more than coping with illness; they are about their identity and sense of belonging in the world. Doctors and nurses are dedicated to curing disease, but healing can happen without a cure. Healing is often connected to the stories we (and others) tell about ourselves. The wonderful thing is that we have so much control over that. Whether someone is challenged by an illness, recovering from a trauma, or coping with a loss, the stories we tell about our experiences and the meaning we make of it can be the beginning of reclaiming our lives.

### **Have you also worked with doctors?**

**Lani:** At UMass Medical Center in Worcester, I consulted with a group of physicians and researchers studying the impact of storytelling on health equity disparity (CHEIR). They were interested in exploring the ways that hearing stories of positive medical intervention could increase the trust in minority communities to engage medical help or follow through on medical recommendations. Although the researchers understood that story could be an important factor in gaining patient trust, they were in need of support to help successful patients convey their stories in a way that could captivate and inspire others. So, essentially I was hired as a story coach to teach storytelling skills to patients as well as to the physicians and researchers. These stories have since been captured on video and disseminated on radio and television throughout the community. New patients are now being screened to see if the stories they heard had an impact on their decision to pursue or follow through on medical treatment.

Patient's challenges, seen through their stories of their cultural and social predicaments, not only encouraged other people struggling with symptoms to seek out medical help, but also

helped doctors to communicate with their patients with more patience and empathy. One of the things that I am most excited about, is that researchers are also beginning to explore the impact of storytelling on the storyteller. What does it mean to share your story with another, knowing that it could perhaps ease their medical challenge, if not even save their life? How does that change how one feels about themselves as the storyteller? Sharing stories is not a one-way process. Both the teller and listener can benefit from the interaction.

**Something that's been on my mind: How does living in the digital age affect how often or how deeply we share our stories? How much do you think our digital world is affecting us?**

**Lani:** I remember that even when I was a little girl sitting at the dinner table back in the 1960s, the TV was on with the evening news blaring across the room. Media and its ability to steal attention from relationships is not something new. Over the past several decades, we've all gradually grown accustomed to letting media direct our lives, leading to distraction, multi-tasking, short attention spans.

There are well-documented accounts of the rise of addiction in the indigenous populations in Alaska during the 60s and 70s when family storytelling traditions were replaced by television. As children no longer sat through long evenings listening to the stories of their elders, certain life lessons and values were no longer handed down. The effects were not felt for years, but researchers now make connections between the decline in family storytelling and loss of family cohesion. But fortunately for all of us, storytelling has been making a comeback. Not only for children, but people of all ages are being encouraged to tell their stories as well as listen to the stories of others. Story Corps and the Moth are good examples of how storytelling is re-entering our culture, leading people to take a deeper interest in listening to each other's stories as opposed to interacting with a device.

One of the problems is that social media tends to lack the depth of story that nurtures us. Facebook certainly seduces us with story, but these stories are often void of depth, values, or learning, causing them to lack the nourishment that stories can give us. It's sort of like junk food—an addictive junk story to fill us for a while, but we feel hungry again very soon.

**Yes, Lani, I'm glad you said that a story needs depth, needs the time for the whole story to unfold. I admit it's the depth that I miss so much in my conversations these days with friends and loved ones. I just wish we had more time for sharing our stories, and finding more meaning from them—together.**

**Lani:** I hope you can advocate for making the time to share stories more deeply.

**I certainly will. In my work with elders as an activities specialist at assisted living communities, I'll be thinking about you when I lead discussion groups and storytelling sessions. You've already motivated me to be a better story listener—a deeper story listener. Thanks so much for your time, your generosity, and your wisdom.**

Afterthoughts: Lani's Beautiful Takeaways

Four of Lani's quotes were so helpful and wise that I couldn't resist doing a quick recap of her stand-outs. These takeaways are worth savoring on their own:

*"Life is far too complex for anyone's story to be held hostage to only one meaning."*

*"Healing comes from expanding our stories so we can find more than one meaning in them. We can see how our own judgment and self-concept has locked us into one meaning that might be holding us back."*

*"By reaching out to the wider community, not only do we see that we matter, but we begin to trust that we matter no matter what."*

*"When we own our story, when we are accountable for it, we don't need to isolate ourselves with it, but we can go out into the world with it. This story has helped me, and it can help you. It's not a one-way process to tell our stories."*

## **Resources**

[Lani Peterson's site](#)

[Boston City Mission](#)

[CHEIR at UMass Medical Center in Worcester](#)



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