digital storytelling

Listen deeply. Tell stories. This is the mantra of the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California, which since 1993 has worked with nearly 1,000 organizations around the world and trained more than 15,000 people in the art of digital storytelling.

In this revised and updated edition of the CDS’s popular guide to digital storytelling, co-founder Joe Lambert details the history and methods of digital storytelling practices. Using a “7 Steps” approach, Lambert helps storytellers identify the fundamentals of dynamic digital storytelling—from seeing the story to assembling and sharing it. Readers of the fourth edition will also find new explorations of the applications of digital storytelling and updated appendices that provide resources for budding digital storytellers, including information about past and present CDS-affiliated projects, and place-based storytelling, a narrative-based approach to understanding experience and landscape. A companion website brings the entire storytelling process to life.

Over the years, the CDS’s work has transformed the way that community activists, educators, health and human services agencies, business professionals, and artists think about story, media, culture, and the power of personal voice in creating change. For those who yearn to tell multimedia stories, Digital Storytelling is the place to begin.

**Joe Lambert** founded the Center for Digital Storytelling (formerly the San Francisco Digital Media Center) in 1994, with his wife Nina Mullen and colleague Dana Atchley. Together they developed a unique computer training and arts program around the Digital Storytelling Workshop. This process grew out of Joe’s long running collaboration with Dana on the solo theatrical multimedia work *Next Exit*. Since then, Joe and his organization have traveled the world to spread the practice of digital storytelling.

More storytelling resources available online at: www.routledge.com/cw/lambert
digital storytelling
capturing lives, creating community

4th edition

joe lambert
For Dana Atchley
Artist, Friend, Digital Storyteller.
Your final exit was beyond reason.
Your vision will live on.
See you on the flipside.
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A decade ago, just about when Joe Lambert wrote the first edition of the indispensable *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, he and his colleague Emily Paulos ventured to Vermont to teach a Digital Storytelling workshop to faculty and staff at Middlebury College. How brave of those two to guide a bunch of academics out from their comfort zones of the rational domain of critical discourse into the deeply affective process of locating, articulating and communicating personal stories. Personal stories? In our own, recorded voices? We would share them? Use multimedia? Whatever for? How vulnerable we felt—would our stories be well-received? Would we be skilled enough using the tools? And…why, again, exactly were we doing this?

Joe, of course, knew what he was at.

He knew that grounding learning in our own lives would give it relevance and thus make it stick. He knew that the Digital Storytelling workshop setting would build community through giving voice to each of us equally and developing collective intelligence among us. And he knew that we teachers and librarians needed to start in our own stories. We couldn’t just teach it, we had to do it.

Those three days changed my teaching. I experienced how deep storytelling—listening and being heard—helped us to relax into doing our best work. I saw how the digital stories themselves, as natural vehicles of reflection and understanding, convey learning. From then on, instead of diving right into the course content, my students focused first on the learning community. After reading Joe’s book, they created digital stories of identity and learning and their journey to this subject matter: the story of their hands, their love of getting lost in the woods, their grandmother’s arrival in the United States.

Ensuring from the get-go that we were all “somebodies,” as Joe would put it, contributed mightily to the success of our work together. This turned out to be especially essential for students from marginalized communities who, ordinarily finding themselves with no voice or ownership of the classroom, often feel shut out. When we started in digital story, they felt they mattered, they belonged. In one student’s words, “It is a medium that easily speaks to the multiple perspectives and simultaneous existences of hyphenated identities.”

Before then, I hadn’t known how much my students needed to tell their own stories, that they had never been asked to consider their stories as important markers,
doors, and conduits. To record their voices. To share their images. To put them all together into a coherent, pleasing, emphatically twenty-first-century whole. And to see what happened when their stories bumped up into one another. No matter what they were studying.

Digital Storytelling, woven through the semester, improved engagement, connection, creative and critical thinking, and communication. Furthermore, it took students out of themselves and into the community. They fanned out into our rural county to mentor youth in using Digital Storytelling to participate in shaping their towns’ future. Several went on to win a grant for a Digital Storytelling project in Ireland, to win college-wide writing prizes for their stories, to submit their stories with graduate school applications, and even to start a nonprofit in India bringing Digital Storytelling to schools.

I hadn’t known that a classroom could be so electric, students so on fire. We had begun the journey, as Richard K. Miller urges, to move beyond focusing on worlds ending; we set about to create better worlds. What I also didn’t know was that ten years later, these revelations would send me out of the classroom for good and into community engagement work. If my students could feel a new connection to their studies, a new interest in community because of the storytelling, what might happen through weaving storytelling into change efforts in geographic communities? With Joe's book by my side, I went to find out.

What Joe teaches us so convincingly in this new edition is that a healthy community—no matter the setting—is grounded in belonging, in understanding, in plurality. As I’ve experienced through community-based storytelling efforts, people will get out of their chairs and into town. When relationships are built and strengthened through deep storytelling, people feel welcomed and valued, and civic participation is enhanced. Just as in the classroom. People feel better about their communities. And positive change can follow. There is nothing new in this.

What is new is the digital. We now communicate our stories widely, beyond our own hearths, out of time. Indeed, we’re awash in such stories. Look at the popularity of radio's StoryCorps and This American Life. Look at the stories woven through TEDtalks, the performance-based gatherings such as The Moth and the Internet’s www.Cowbird.com. Look at www.YoungWritersProject.org and www.Globalvoicesonline.org. Look at small, localized story movements coming out of museums and libraries and open-access television and oral history centers across the planet. Medical, business, and law schools are paying attention to the power of stories in healing, and in developing ethical, effective business leaders. Citizen journalism, as seen in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, is grounding the big moment in the mural of the individual experience. We're telling it as it is. As we experience it. We're forming communities around our stories.

Indeed, the Me-story has gone viral. And that's both good and bad. At its worst it has become the Me-Me-Me-story, manipulative or cynical, exploitative or narcissistic, superficial or vapid, a way to seduce us into buying or believing or giving. Splashed across screens.

At its best, the Me-story becomes the I-story: I share my experience as one small but essential piece of a large complex mosaic of stories—Our story. But it takes time. As creativity and psycholinguistics scholar Vera John-Steiner notes, successful
collaborations “require sustained time and effort ... the shaping of a shared language, the pleasures and risks of honest dialogue, and the search for a common ground” (2000: 184). But it’s hard to find the time when we must be agile, shifting approach, tool, and interaction as needed. We’re on the move. Everything is uncertain. We treat public spaces as private; we’re reluctant to get out of our cars, tear ourselves from our mobile tethers to look at each other, to take on the slow endeavor of building relationships across and between affinity groups, of making the lasting connections that underlie a democratic society. But Joe understands that if we have any hope to restore the health of our communities in this time of convulsive change, we’d better find the time.

That this fourth edition should appear just now gives me hope. Its comprehensiveness, its balance between vision, example and guide, speaks to Joe’s responsiveness to change, and to the building of a digital storytelling movement across education, community-change, and health sectors. This book will help us in our community work to give deep storytelling its due, with the tools and media of our time, wherever community is important, wherever we need to be “somebodies” instead of “nobodies.” There could be no more important moment to tell stories as a means to bear witness to our world and to change it for the better. There could be no more important moment for Joe to write the new edition of his book.

We need this book. We need it now. We need Joe’s unmistakably warm, wry, passionate voice showing us that we matter, we heal, we belong, we take responsibility, we act.

—Barbara Ganley,
Founder and Director,
Community-Expressions.com
June, 2012
On behalf of my collaborators at the Center for Digital Storytelling, I would like to graciously thank a number of people for their contributions to the development of the *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. To start with, I would like to thank the thousands of students who have shared their lives and stories with us and inspire the work of our Center. My colleagues and I have the greatest job in the world, and in every workshop we expand our circle of friends. We must recognize that this book itself has seeds in two projects. In 1996 we were given support by Apple Computer, under the guidance of Ralph Rogers and Kelli Richards, to create the original *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*. Then in 1998, the Institute for the Future, led by our friends Kathi Vian and Bob Johansen, gave us support for *Digital Storytelling: The Creative Application of Digital Technology to the Ancient Art of Storytelling*.

The original work in 2002 on this particular book was made possible principally as a collaboration with Emily Paulos, the Managing Director at CDS. Her support and guidance has remained vital to the ongoing process of evolving this text. I want to thank all the staff at CDS, Daniel Weinshenker, Andrea Spagat, Stefani Sese, Allison Myers, Rob Kershaw, Amy Hill, Zoe Jacobson, and former staff Caleb Paull and Thenmozhi Soundararajan, and our numerous other collaborators. My work is driven by the efforts of this family of co-workers, and I thank all of them for their commitment to the general development of the practice of Digital Storytelling. For his help on the prior edition, and in the last review of this edition, I give a high five to the Ithaca Kid, Patrick Castrenze. I want to give thanks to Erica Wetter and Margo Irvin of Routledge for their work on this edition, moving up from a self-published book, to an “official” publication is a great step for us, and we appreciate the vote of confidence this represents in our work.

Over the years Digital Storytelling has evolved beyond our studios and our workshops with practices in numerous contexts. We look back to recognize the importance of our collaboration with countless organizations and individuals. Some of the names include Warren Hegg and the Digital Clubhouse Network, Glynda Hull at UC Berkeley, Ana Serrano and the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto, Daniel Meadows and the team at Capture Wales from the BBC, Helen Simondson and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Geska Helena Andersson, Simon Stromberg, Grete Jamissen, Nikolene Lohmann, and Kaos Pilots in Scandanavia; Pip
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I would like to thank the following individuals for permission to reproduce illustrations in the text: Zahid Al-Amin (Interlude 5); Ray Baylor (Interlude 4); Rosalie Blakey Wardell (portrait of Dana Atchley); Roberto Gerli (images on pp. 113–15, Chapter 9 images 7–13); Monte Hallis (Interlude 1); Rob Kershaw (images on pp. 108–11, Chapter 9 images 1-6); Wynne Maggi (Interlude 2); Elizabeth Ross (Interlude 3); Thenmozhi Soundarajan and Thiakavalhy Soundarajan (storyboard in Chapter 8).

Finally, as a book of ideas, inspired by the Digital Storytelling workshop, grew out of my collaboration with Nina Mullen and Dana Atchley. Nina Mullen spent nine years at my side developing our centers in San Francisco and Berkeley, and traveling the world teaching. As my life partner, she has been through this saga, and her support, and the support of our amazing children, Massimo and Amalina, has sustained me in this work. Dana Atchley and I took the original trip on Next Exit twenty-six years ago. His exit in 2000 was unbearably heartbreaking. His spirit sits over my left shoulder, keeping me laughing at my own self-serious perspectives. He would have enjoyed how this road trip has continued.
Introduction

As I write these words the sun is shining in Berkeley, California. Springtime. Good time to start anew.

If you are new to this subject, and this approach to media practice, you might be expecting a textbook. Well, this is not exactly a textbook, although the prior editions have been used in this way for the last decade. These are thoughts, both contextual, practical, and speculative, that have grown out of my work in media. The principal topic is the gathering of personal stories into short little nuggets of media called Digital Stories, through a methodology called Digital Storytelling.

Twenty years ago my non-profit organization, the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) began work in this field. Digital Storytelling has evolved to become an international movement of deeply committed folks working with story in virtually every field of human endeavor. Our experience in managing over 200 small- to large-scale projects, leading over a 1,000 workshops, and assisting more than 15,000 individuals to complete films informs this writing, as does the work of more than 1,000 other professionals working in the field. You can learn more about CDS at www.storycenter.org.

But you are probably more interested in how to use this book. In the first four chapters, I attempt to establish the context for our work in Digital Storytelling. I present some of the larger reasons why I believe this movement came to be, the specific history of my organization, how to think about story ideas, and how the CDS model of Digital Storytelling relates to other media practices that have been also described as digital storytelling. In the middle of the book, Chapters 5–9, you find the how-to section of the book, describing both how to make a digital story, how to manage the workshop process from the facilitative, and some thoughts on an approach to design in the form. And in Chapters 10–15, we address how the work is applied, starting with a discussion of the public/private issues of a workshop-based practice, then turning to a broad catalog of applications and finally interviewing several practitioners in the fields of public health, education, community development, and health care.

The book is meant to be helpful for first-time students exploring this genre of media, as well as educators, activists, artists, and human service professionals wanting to lead Digital Storytelling processes with local communities. The book
makes general arguments but always lands in practical help for someone trying to make their first digital story.

But how should you understand this book? To start with, despite an emphasis on helping people to make a media document, this is not a book about writing and producing media work for broad distribution. We are discussing forms of personal storytelling as an expressive form for anybody, from students in a middle school to retirees in a nursing home. In this sense, it is not about authoring multimedia stories as a profession. I still hope would-be professionals or committed amateurs find some useful thoughts here as well.

This is not a book about becoming an author, but authorship is certainly a central topic of this book. And also how authorship creates agency in life and social interactions. Being the author of your own life, of the way you move through the world, is a fundamental idea in democracy. We want to help everyone use the power of storytelling to project their authority, to expand their sense of being celebrated, of becoming at whatever level, a celebrity within their community.

At the same time, I have a deep mistrust of celebrity, of authority, of specialization and expertise, and the most cutting “-ism” of all, elitism. Elitism separates those of us that get to trade on their rank, and those that may not, would not, or simply cannot. I believe that our collective future is based on re-negotiating the distinctions of privilege and rank in our world. As long as authors are allowed to act like authoritarians, taking more than their share of resource, and presuming they know what is best for other people’s stories, we are not going to get out of the mess we find ourselves in at the moment. Of course, we should continue to value those that climb ladders – who distinguish themselves through various achievements; the ability to out-perform, out-maneuver, and out-play others because of sacrifice, focus and determination – as important … as worthy of celebration. But we should also learn new ways to celebrate those that simply overcome … whatever their barriers, whatever their challenges. We need to cherish that which is in all of us to step over and around the obstacle in front of us, and move forward with our lives.

As I travel around the world, often to universities or other kinds of places of relative privilege, I am drawn to people who are using story to negotiate these distinctions in rank and opportunity (not by accident, these same people are drawn to this work). People who, though perhaps successful as media storytellers themselves, see in every single person a tremendous potential for sharing insight, for wisdom, for teaching us a bit more about what it means to be human. The majority of people who will benefit from this book are those that are looking at ways to break down distinctions of privilege – from Service Learning students working in communities, to people joining in human rights and international development projects, to community organizers and local activists leading campaigns for justice.
Somebodies and Nobodies

One morning at the end of January (of 2012) I woke up with a startle. I was sitting at a desk, listening to the crickets that feed my daughter’s gecko chirping nearby.

What startled me up and started me writing feverishly was the convergence of several thoughts that seemed connected to the large project of this book. The previous night my daughter had another homework crisis. She is on the cusp of being defined as a special needs reader/writer, and she is going through massive sadness in recognition of the event. I have this strong sense the pain comes from that falling from grace, from believing yourself as a child as being a naturally and completely whole and flourishing person, to a sense of less than, dissected, left out, not fully a body. A nobody.

As it happens I had started a book called All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies and the Politics of Dignity by my fellow Berkeley resident, Robert Fuller. The book is a summation of his thoughts on rank, and what he calls rankism, not just elitism, but the broader category of differences based on the distribution of power in our societies.

What struck me is how a third-grader is prepared for her entry into rank, into a sense of either being advanced, or being left behind. I understood how completely dedicated the dominant system is to this premise. The students are racing to college; some will win, some will lose. Those that lose will be nobodies, and conversely, to be somebody you had better win. This creates monsters out of both categories. Selfish investment bankers and raging gangbangers. Educational reform is the endless attempt at making this unpalatable system seem bearable.

The converse to ranked privilege is solidarity. Solidarity excludes the possibility of actual difference between anybody. Anybodies then become anathema to systems of exploitation, of rank, of privilege. That could be “anybody” becomes a clearer way of expressing a sense of sameness as opposed to difference. If I am anybody, I am already somebody, and I can never be a nobody.

Healthy Bodies, Healthy Stories

This winter, I also spent time with Dr. Richard Jackson at UCLA. We talked about storytelling and healthy communities. Positive psychology, and self-esteem, are always the staples of healthy living. We need to nourish all the seeds that sit within us that make us feel good about ourselves. As our work has become more and more about surfacing those stories of survivors from traumas big and small, I have come to appreciate how much storytelling is also about mucking around in the seedbed, digging up the crap that holds us down, so that the biological process of story can flourish. The real person inside us descends into our bodies as we face diminishment in our lives. We eat ourselves big, we stress and strain ourselves hard to build a shell around those losses.

I have come to a deeper appreciation of the relationship between story and health. That the stretching, massaging, and meditating our way out of our predicaments as individuals and as societies needs to be combined with the process of telling and
re-telling stories good and bad about our lives, not just at on therapist’s sofa, but as acts of art and creativity. We need to stop and listen to each other’s stories as daily ritual, as life process.

Which is why listening is the hallmark quality of positive social engagement. Listening, making space for the silenced, making room for the nobodies in mind to find their somebody at heart so they feel like anybody else, makes us dignified. It allows us to check our status at the door.

If we are to create, to use Fuller’s language – a Dignitarian society, it starts with the signifying process of story.

**Storytelling in the Social Media Moment**

This work in Digital Storytelling began a few months after William Jefferson Clinton was elected President. I am aware the freshman college student that might be reading this book was not yet born. We started before computers were broadly used to make media, before the World Wide Web, before the emergence of search engines, blogging, ipods, podcasts, smartphones and tablets. And long before social media and YouTube. Personal computers have traveled a great distance, once the tools of business people and designers, we live with computers as the most common appliances. Communication technology is the landscape of our imagination, and an average middle-class kid born in 1993, has never experienced anything other than the ubiquity of tools that allows them to shoot, sample, and share media.

In the twenty-first century, the companies that make this possible, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Facebook, are not only are bigger than most media companies, they are bigger than most oil companies. Yet we have not become a world of media producers, the ease of production and distribution does not mean all of us see ourselves as authors. We simply watch more of everything – the internet-capable device is our television set, and many of us can walk around the world with a screen in our hand, almost never disconnected to a stream of media.

But among a quickly growing number of consumers, as in a large number of the nearly billion Facebook members and 100 million Twitterers, leisure time has become increasingly interactive, where some amount of creative participation is part of the fun. More people than ever are sharing their own media, social media engagement now represents over 20 percent of total internet use, many millions of hours are being spent by people uploading pictures, tagging links with comments, writing little blurbs, and yes, once in awhile uploading a video they made themselves.

Many more people, and communities, are waking up to the power of their own voice in the media, and are finding the means to express themselves, for themselves and their communities through the new media. Change is constant, from iPhone apps to produce and edit digital stories, to intensely creative social media projects like cowbird (www.cowbird.com), we can imagine a thousand new ways to lure us into sharing our stories. We are just beginning to see how our shared creativity will become our main ways of entertaining each other.
This book suggests how we can take our deeply felt attraction to media, which has done so much to silence our own voices, and find our way back to the campfire. Through digital storytelling, we all can become storytellers again.

I hope you find it useful, and I always invite my readers to email me, joe@storycenter.org if they have any questions, thoughts or stories to share.
Bibliography


Digital Storytelling


Storytelling, Story Work, and Public Speaking


**Creative Writing and Autobiography**


**Counseling, Group Process, Facilitation**


**Design, Media and Applications**


**Storytelling and Education**


**Cognitive Theory, Psychology, and Narrative**


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**Storytelling in Corporate and Organizational Contexts**


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**Community Arts Practice**


General


