

Teaching by storytelling

I was in Portland, Oregon recently, teaching my "[Safe at Home](#)" off duty survival class to a room full of high-speed narcotics cops. Addressing a bit of an intimidating audience, I knew I had to grab their attention right from the beginning, and I had to hold it for nearly four hours, so I decided to tell them some stories.

Whether you're in the classroom, in roll call, or in a squad car sitting next to a new rookie, storytelling is an excellent method of training. If you're a field training officer, a couple of well-placed stories during those "teachable moments" on shift can make a great impact on your recruit. As a supervisor or manager who conducts a roll call or shift briefing each day, you can use stories to present messages on officer survival, leadership, ethics, or service to the community. As a police trainer, storytelling is an invaluable tool in the classroom. And there is no better way to honor our fallen and our injured than to tell their stories.

Why are stories so powerful in a learning environment? Professor Kieran Egan, author of *Teaching as Story Telling*, writes that using storytelling as an educational tool begins with very young children. Bucking the accepted but rather staid child educational theories of Jean Piaget, Egan believes that by focusing on imaginative intellectual activity, educators can use stories and fantasy to help children understand a concept and retain it more effectively. Transferring this theory to adult learners is quite simple, and extremely effective. For example, let's say I tell you that if you don't call in every traffic stop you run the risk of your co-workers not being able to find you (or even know you're in trouble) until it's too late. You will intellectually understand that concept but you may not *emotionally* relate to it.

What would happen however, if I tell you the story of twenty five year old [Officer Anthony Raymond](#) of the Hillside, IL Police Department who, in 1972 was abducted after he stopped two men who – unbeknownst to him – had just committed an armed robbery. Officer Raymond was stabbed, but not fatally, and then taken to the home of one of the suspects. He was eventually strangled to death, stuffed in a 55 gallon drum, and buried in a Wisconsin field. Because he did not call in his stop, there was a significant delay in discovering that he had been abducted, and there was no vehicle description, license plate or any other information immediately available to help locate Officer Raymond. I first heard that story in 1981 in the police academy, and to this day, I still imagine that handsome 23 year old cop, the terror he must have felt, and the frustration of his fellow officers who discovered his empty squad car and had no idea where to begin looking for their brother officer.

Thanks to Anthony Raymond, I have *never* made a traffic stop without calling it in.

Balance your stories

Be extremely cautious in the way you tell the story of a fallen law enforcement hero. In the majority of police officer deaths, especially in those involving felonious assaults, someone probably made some mistakes. Talk first about all the things they did right. When the academy instructor told us Officer Raymond's story, he first talked about what a motivated cop he was and how everyone liked him. He went on to tell us that Anthony had fought his attackers, and how he had survived the stabbing and it took multiple assailants to finally kill him. In other words, the instructor made clear to us that Officer Raymond was a warrior. When I tell his story, I also talk about the thousands of recruit officers that Anthony Raymond has undoubtedly influenced with his story; he is a hero because so many have learned a valuable, life saving lesson from his sacrifice.

Also, if you're teaching officer survival, don't tell ten stories about cops who died and only one about a cop who won; and *always* end with a win. Practice a little theatrics. Think about the best storyteller you ever knew (it may be your grandfather, a favorite teacher, your minister, or your college roommate) and analyze what makes them such a great storyteller, and then work on your own style.

The story you *don't* tell can sometimes be the most powerful

Your own "war stories" can be valuable teaching tools too, but be careful about being the hero of your own story. One of my [Street Survival Seminar](#) teaching partners, [Sgt. Ray DeCunto](#) is a veteran street cop, a narcotics officer, and a SWAT operator who has had to personally use deadly force twice in his career. I've heard both of the stories, and they are filled with learning points, tactical tips, and even a couple of macabre laughs. However, when he is teaching, Ray rarely mentions that he's had to kill two people who were trying to kill him. He may mention that he's been involved in a shooting or two, or speak briefly about his reaction in the aftermath of these incidents, but he never talks about the actual shootings. He only briefly alludes to them.

Find stories that relate to your audience

When I was teaching my classroom full of narcs, I looked for stories about undercover and plainclothes officers who

had been involved in off-duty incidents. When I discovered I had a couple of prosecutors in the class, at the first break I inserted a video where a lawyer gets shot by a disgruntled client of his courtroom opponent and told that story so that the lawyers in the class felt like they were a part of the group and hopefully more engaged in the learning process.

Do your research, make sure you know the story, if you don't, then say so, and use what general training points you can. If you're going to use video or other footage, make sure you verify its authenticity and as much of the facts before your use it in class. There have been many times when the Street Survival cadre has been using a video to make a point and at the break a student walks up to one of us and says "that was me in that video."

Try to find out a little bit of personal information or a little known fact to include in your story, but don't get too caught up in minutia; it's the training points you're after, not a bedtime story. Also, a great story can be lost if you use terms that your audience is not familiar with. Saying the offender was armed with a pistol with armor-piercing rounds is generally more effective (and less irritating) than saying, "He came out with a loaded FN Five-Seven FDE..."

Recently, [my husband](#) gave a banquet talk at the Illinois Tactical Officers Association's annual conference. He spoke on "The Nature of Courage." He used two stories in his 30 minute talk. He first talked about physical courage, using the story of "*The Three Hundred*," an elite but small group of Spartans fighters who went into battle with a giant, well-armed Persian army, even though it was certain death. This audience of SWAT guys and military vets loved this story, as they could all relate. But then Dave told a second, unexpected story, that of Private Desmond Doss, a conscientious objector and a medic who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service in the Pacific in WWII.

Dave used Des Doss as an extraordinary example of *moral courage*, and as I looked around the room, I saw 685 high-operating warrior types leaning forward, heads down or eyes glistening, and I knew Dave had hit a home run, and that the extraordinary impact of those two stories would last long past the conference had ended.

According to Dave, the use of military examples, ancient as well as contemporary, are a great way to give law enforcement officers a complete understanding of a training point. These can be used in tactical as well as moral contexts and even though the Spartans fought 2400 years ago at Thermopylae their example of courage is as powerful as ever. The ironic impact of the story of a conscientious objector winning the Congressional Medal of Honor is one that fully involves the learner in a manner that makes moral courage a readily understandable and essential quality of the heroic.

Some learners remember facts, figures, and stats—they are analytical, left-brain thinkers. Others respond to the emotional and/or the visual and are right brain thinkers. Most of us are a combination of the two. Storytelling involves the whole brain and everyone can get something from a properly told story.

Good trainers make of point of training for both extremes and the use of storytelling is a powerful way to make sure everyone gets the point!

Sergeant Betsy Smith has nearly 30 years of law enforcement experience and recently retired as a patrol supervisor in a Chicago suburb. A graduate of the Northwestern University Center for Public Safety's School of Staff and Command, Betsy is a police trainer, author and instructor for the Calibre Press [Street Survival Seminar](#). Visit Betsy's website at www.femaleforces.com.