

Storytelling

can change the world

*'Changing the world is the only fit
work for a grown man or woman.'*

HOWARD LUCK GOSSAGE, QUIRKY, GAME-CHANGING ADMAN



Story telling

can change the world

Ken Burnett

Other books by this author

The Field by the River, Anova Books, London,
hardback, 2008, softback, 2009, and Kindle,
2013.

The Zen of Fundraising, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco,
softback, 2006.

Tiny Essentials of an Effective Volunteer Board, White
Lion Press, London, softback, 2004.

Relationship Fundraising, second edition, Jossey-
Bass, San Francisco, hardback 2002. The White
Lion Press, London, hardback, 1992.

Friends for Life, The White Lion Press, London,
hardback, 1996.

How to Produce Inspiring Annual Reports, Directory
of Social Change, London, softback, 2000, with
Karin Weatherup.

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This book is dedicated to
Marie, Joe and Charlie.



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Thanks too to all the other writers whose work informed and inspired me, particularly those individuals and organisations who generously gave me permission to quote their work so that I might seem more clever and well informed. For a list of permissions see page 266.

The 'turning point' stories that divide the chapters are all real examples of tales that provoked change and, one way or another, involved me through my work or personally. They are included merely as examples, to add colour and context.

What others have said about this book

'I really like this book for its important history and exquisite examples, stories to make us laugh and cry, tips to do the right things the right ways and the way it's inspired us to do the right thing and change the world.'

SIMONE JOYAUX, AUTHOR, *FIRE YOUR LOUSY BOARD MEMBERS*, AND OTHER BOOKS, USA.

'Change in the world begins with change in oneself. Thus the real object of all cause advertising is not to tell people about what is happening in the world, but to lead them to ask what, if anything, they are prepared to do about it. It is not ultimately about slave labour camps, butchered seal pups, or blinded gas victims, it is about what sort of person each of us wants to be. The question applies as much to the storyteller as to the hearer. To be a change-maker, first change yourself. For a start, read this book.'

INDRA SINHA, AUTHOR, *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*, SHORTLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2007, UK.

'A big thanks is in order. What you have here is a compendium of everything known about storytelling in the fundraising context. It's an amazingly helpful desk reference. I found new details about familiar subjects (emotions, for instance); unfamiliar insights; good swift kicks in the pants ... every page has something worth hearing for the first or the hundredth time.'

'You've written a classic. A very full meal.'

TOM AHERN, AUTHOR, *MAKING MONEY WITH DONOR NEWSLETTERS*, AND OTHER BOOKS, UK.

'Passion is a word not often associated with business schools and it should be! This latest book from Ken Burnett has it ripping from every page. At a time when cynicism and lack of trust rules, this book, through its innovative style of telling you about compelling acts of innovation and courage, shows we can still make the world a better place.'

PROFESSOR PAUL PALMER, CASS BUSINESS SCHOOL, LONDON, UK.



'Stories are the secret reservoir of values. Change the stories individuals and nations live by and you change the individuals and nations.'

BEN OKRI, WRITER

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'You don't write because you want to say something. You write because you have something to say.'

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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An awful lot of storytelling isn't really about making people understand, it's about making people care.'

STEVEN MOFFAT, TELEVISION WRITER AND PRODUCER,
AUTHOR OF SEVERAL EPISODES OF *DR WHO*

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'All the stories I would like to write persecute me. When I am in my chamber, it seems as if they are all around me, like little devils, and while one tugs at my ear, another tweaks my nose, and each says to me, "Sir, write me, I am beautiful".'

UMBERTO ECO, *THE ISLAND OF THE DAY BEFORE*

PREFACE

The worst story
in the world

Just as this book was being prepared to pass for press I found myself involved in the task of telling a truly transformational story on behalf of a magnificently brave and effective organisation, Amnesty International. For a press advertisement, Amnesty's UK Section had commissioned me and my friend and colleague Indra Sinha to tell the story of what we've come to know as the darkest corner of our planet, the gulag of North Korea, the hellish forced labour camps of so-called Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un.

It would by any standards be an ambitious advertisement, for we wanted to do more than just campaign, build Amnesty's brand and fundraise, all in the same ad. More important even than achieving these three objectives, we wanted to tell the world a difficult, horrific story that urgently needed telling. And we had to tell it in a way that had never been told before.

We immersed ourselves in researching the stories that have emerged from inside those terrible places, then roped in creative director Neil Godfrey and special effects photographer Neil Barstow to produce the most powerful tale we could tell in a bold, long-copy departure from accepted press advertising practice. The first double-page ads appeared in leading UK quality newspapers just before Christmas 2013. The shorter version opposite was produced a few weeks later to coincide with the unveiling of the report from a special UN Commission of Inquiry. We couldn't have told this story without key Amnesty people, the final members of our team.

Prior to unveiling the first draft of our ad to a roomful of Amnesty communications people I explained that I've long believed fundraising organisations such as theirs have the best stories in the world to tell and the best of reasons for telling them. I then ventured my opinion

North Korea's leaders would do almost anything to prevent people reading this, so when you've read it please pass it on.

As you read this, some 100,000 people are locked in North Korea's brutal slave labour camps, where most will die of cold, hunger, exhaustion, disease, torture, or execution. Amnesty has worked for years to close the camps, but the regime flatly denies that they exist. Inside the country there were dreadful rumours – but if no one guessed the whole truth, maybe it was because the truth was too horrific to imagine.

관리소 YODOK

Kwaniso (Political Prison Camp) 15 at Yodok encloses 370 square kilometres of mountains and river valleys, its perimeter stitched together by razor wire, booby traps and high-voltage fences. What we know of it comes from the very few people who have been released and who later fled North Korea. All were held in a sector reserved for those whose crimes are less serious. Those accused of serious crimes, most inmates, are sent to Yodok's 'Total Control Zone' where conditions are harsher. We don't know what happens there because no one who goes in there ever comes out again.

At Kaechon bodies were often buried in the prison orchard, whose apples, peaches, pears, and plums are famous for their size and extraordinary sweetness, and reserved for senior party and police officials.

치명적인 HUNGER

In Yodok starving inmates hunted any animal that 'blew, crawled, or grew in the field.' 'We had no food,' Kang says. 'We'd eat anything we could lay hands on, frogs, rats, snakes, insects.' A starving prisoner chewed a giant's leather whip. Badly beaten, he was made to eat intestinal worms picked from a latrine and died soon after.

Mothers tried to keep their children alive by catching pregnant rats. The placentas and tiny fetuses were believed to cure disease and made rich eating. Kang caught frogs and worms and centipedes and learned to relish salamanders, which were thought to provide the vitamins necessary for survival. His first attempt to eat one was a failure. 'I pushed it into my mouth, but I could not swallow. The creature was struggling to get out of my mouth.'

I was frightened, I closed my eyes and bit it hard. My mouth was suddenly full of bitter and stinking juice and I had to spit it out. A friend taught Kang that the only way to eat one was to hold the tail and gulp it down.

도주 SHIN

Skin Dong-hyuk knew no life other than that of Kwaniso 14 at Kaechon. A slave while still in the womb, he was born in Kaechon's Total Control Zone and was destined to live out his whole life and die there.

Skin grew up eating bark off trees and searching cow dung for undigested seeds. Aged ten, he was set to work in a coal mine, had part of a finger axed off for breaking a sewing machine, saw a girl his age beaten to death for stealing five kernels of corn and was made to watch his mother and brother being executed by a firing squad.

In January 2005 Shin and his friend Park braved Kaechon's 3,000 volt fence. Park died quivering on the wire. Skin scrambled over his body, lived, and found his way to Seoul, where he found that many people didn't, or didn't want, to believe his horrific story.

The North Korean regime claims that the defectors are liars. 'There is no human rights issue in this country as everyone leads the most dignified and happy life.' In June last year the regime warned would-be defectors: 'Sordid human scum will never be able to look up to the sky and will never find an inch of land to be buried after their death.'

항성 STAR

Now please imagine Yodok under a thick blanket of snow. It's a night of brilliant stars but the prisoners, unheeding, shiver in their unheated huts. High above, unseen by them, a tiny point of light is moving across the sky. Amnesty shines a light into the darkness of the North Korean gulag by keeping watch on the camps from space, using satellites to overfly them. Photos taken by Amnesty's Science for Human Rights programme reveal that the regime is expanding the reality of North Korea's gulag, and making the survivors' terrifying witness impossible to ignore. We chivy and chip at Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un's pride. And the Supreme Leader wobbles. Kang says the notorious Ssangburi prison was closed after an Amnesty report exposed the goings-on there.

너희 YOU

North Korean defector Joo Il Kim, a former army captain, likens the plight of the prisoners to that of a person who has fallen in a deep hole. It's not easy to hear the voices of those who have fallen in the hole, but when they are heard, it's up to the people outside to raise the alarm and get help. The more people who know, the better. So if you see a campaign for human rights in North Korea, join it, tell your friends, do whatever you can. One day, and it may be sooner than you think, the walls of silence and fear in North Korea will crumble and the prisoners will be free. On that day of celebration, imagine their joy when they realise that their long nightmare has ended at last. Together we can and will get these vile camps closed forever.

Please pick up your pen, fill in the coupon and become a part of this crucial work. Please, do it now.



The prisoners will spend the rest of their lives in brutal labour camps and to avoid starving will have to carry on eating rats, worms, snakes, centipedes, cockroaches and lizards until the rest of us realise that even in a situation apparently destitute of hope, there is always something we can do to help, and that it is our human duty to do it.

연좌제 KANG

Kang Chae-hwan was nine when he and his family were sent to Yodok. His grandpa vanished first. No one knew what his crime was, but you can be sent to the camps for joking about the leader, owning a Bible, or just 'gossiping'.

North Korea's doctrine of 'guilt by association' punishes three generations of an offender's family, so security police soon came knocking for Kang, his granny, father, sister and brothers.

Yodok specialises in hideous surprises. Guards might order a new arrival to bury a dead body and wear the corpse's clothes. There was no way to wash their clothes, so prisoners wore them filthy, teeming with lice and fleas, and waited for rainstorms to do their laundry and ease the itching.

위험한 WORK

In Kwaniso 14 at Kaechon, Mrs L, a housewife from Pyongyang, had spent all day carrying loads of human dung to the camp's huge cesspool. She was very tired. The lid of the tank stuck. She climbed up to push the door open, slipped, plunged into the deep pool of liquid faeces and vanished under the surface. A guard yelled, 'Stop! Let her die there unless you want to die the same way!' She was left to drown in shit.

'I want to support Amnesty and help close the labour camps in North Korea'

To donate £10 now text YODOK7 to 70505* or visit amnesty.org.uk/yodok

I would like to help by donating ☐ £15 ☐ £25 ☐ £50 ☐ £75 ☐ £100 ☐ £200 ☐ Other £.....

☐ I feel my cheque to Amnesty International or ☐ Please charge my Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐ Other ☐

Card No. Expiry date Date of birth (if under 18)

Title (Mr/Ms/Miss/Ms) Name

Address

Postcode Telephone No.

Signature Date

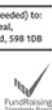
Amnesty International UK Charity No 1051683

GIVE AID 10. 10 claim back 20p for every £1 you donate.

☐ I would like Amnesty International to send me a free copy of the report 'Human Rights in North Korea' (if I have not already received one) and a free copy of the report 'Human Rights in North Korea' (if I have not already received one).

Please fill in the coupon and post (no stamp needed) to: Freepost RSHB-JYVA-UGKC, North Korean Appeal, Amnesty International UK, PO Box 36, Sheffield, S9B 1DB

* Don't cost £10 + standard network charge of no more than 20p. Amnesty receives £9.50. This must be over £8 and have obtained the full report's permission to use it. Will only reach the UK if you are in the UK. To sign out at any time call our support line on 020 7033 1772.



that this particular story – such is the horror of it – might well qualify as the worst story in the world.

To prove the point I then read to them the entire text of the ad aloud, all 2,300 words of it. When I'd finished there was a long silence. A few tears were quietly brushed away. Such emotion from this audience seemed to me to signal that, most probably, we had a success on our hands.

Before I attempt to summarise reactions to this advertisement and the hurdles we had to overcome to create it, please if you can bear it, read the single-page ad. It's not for the faint-hearted, yet it is the truth. And it's from the truth, told well, that great change comes.

The single-page ad text

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'So if you see a campaign for human rights in North Korea, join it, tell your friends, do whatever you can.'

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Above the illustration sat a stark caption.

The prisoners will spend the rest of their lives in brutal labour camps and to avoid starving will have to carry on eating rats, worms, snakes, centipedes, cockroaches and lizards until the rest of us realise that, even in a situation apparently destitute of hope, there is always something we can do to help, and that it is our human duty to do it.

A reply coupon followed, so that those who wanted to could make a donation, under the headline, 'I want to support Amnesty and help close the labour camps in North Korea.'

The British public, thus confronted over their breakfast tables, responded in droves. This first test showed that an earlier effective means of supporter recruitment – long-copy 'story' ads – could be capable of resurrection. With some lessons learned the second test, eight weeks later, did significantly better. So Amnesty found that it could recruit new supporters cost-effectively while campaigning powerfully, emotionally and in detail to their most important audiences. In addition to direct response the advertisement brought Amnesty benefits in media coverage, awareness, supporter inspiration and staff motivation. Future campaigns will refine and improve both the storytelling and the means whereby people respond, so Amnesty will continue to improve how it gets its stories through in what is, without doubt, an ever more noisy, cluttered and competitive world.

For sure it was a story well worth telling, despite the many difficulties. It took a combination of bravery, idealism, fine writing, persistence, rigorous attention to detail and sheer bloody-mindedness to get into print.

In an article in *Third Sector* magazine reviewing these ads Amnesty International UK's director, Kate Allen, said: 'Human interest stories and empathy have always been at the heart of how we campaign, and these are undiluted stories that can't fail to move the reader. Stories are our stock in trade. It's a simple formula and that's what Amnesty is, stripped back: a story and a refusal to accept the status quo.'

A comment in that *Third Sector* article from Peter Gilheany, director of Forster Communications, observed that while these advertisements break the conventional rules of direct response press advertising, they really work. 'It's not an approach you can employ too often, he said, '...but every now and then it is good to give your complacent assumptions about the right way of doing things a hefty kick up the backside, which is exactly what these adverts do.'

Peter may be right, and you can't use this style of story too often. Though, Indra Sinha's been doing it successfully these past 20 years and more.

Stories of this kind are invariably a challenge to tell. Issues of acceptability, sensitivity, permissions, verification, anonymity, creating powerful images by reconstruction, timing, copy approval, coupon construction and more all combine to make an already difficult story even more difficult to pull together. But tough though they are at the time, when a great story is told the trials and challenges all fall away into insignificance. And the results really make a difference.

This book is dedicated to telling similarly difficult yet life-changing stories, whether heart-warming or painful, upsetting or uplifting. It is for all stories that raise spirits, expose issues and shine light upon the limitless potential of life, as well as for all other equally important stories that have not yet been written, have not yet been told.

Ken Burnett, London, August 2014



PART ONE

Why we tell stories

TURNING POINT

Sometimes a true story can have life-changing consequences. I've chosen to tell this tale here because it's personal and it makes the point that underpins this book.

Charlie and the human rights lawyers of Guatemala

My youngest son, Charlie, was just 14 years old when I came home from visiting some development projects in Guatemala and Haiti. I'd been particularly impressed by a group of human rights lawyers I'd met in Guatemala and the stories they told me of the persecution they'd endured from the military dictatorship there. Impassively they told me of the cloud of disappearances, threats and killings under which they and their families had lived and worked for years as they struggled to document and oppose the regime's widespread human rights abuses – massacres, rapes, torture and acts of genocide against the indigenous tribal people. In return for their devoted fight for the rights of the weakest in their society these brave lawyers were hounded by their own government, abducted, imprisoned, tortured and forced into exile. Several of their friends and colleagues paid for their courage with their lives. The quiet dignity and dedication in the stories told me by these unassuming men and women made a massive impression on me and somehow, when I got back, I managed to convey that to my family, particularly to young Charlie.

That day Charlie decided he would become a human rights lawyer. Now a dozen years later with his masters in human rights law and two further law degrees under his belt he's just completed his training with a specialist human rights law firm in London, preparing for his life's work, setting wrongs to right. He's already handled several difficult, challenging cases, a few of them quite dramatic, even heartbreaking, and he's helped win some, too. He earns half what his friends in corporate law get paid and I feel bad about that. But I'm hugely proud of him and his decision, of his single-minded dedication and persistent application to tread a difficult path that grew from that simple story, which he's since seen through to such a great end. Those lawyers from Guatemala inspired Charlie, not only changing his life, but the lives of many others and will go on changing lives for the better for years to come.

All from a short, transformational story.



1. How transformational storytelling could be just right for you

*'There is nothing to writing.
All you do is sit down at a typewriter
and bleed.'*

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Chances are that, as you're reading this book, you too are, or want to be, a transformational storyteller. So you probably already know that one of the best tools we have to help change this flawed world is a story, told well. It's widely accepted that people respond differently to stories from any other kind of information that comes their way. And for the five key stages of recruiting others to change the world – engagement, involvement, inspiration, influence and action – nothing works as well with almost any audience, anywhere, as simply telling a transformational story. Just how, where, when and why these stories have such impact is the subject of this book. Its purpose is to help you tell your stories better.

For clarity I should perhaps attempt a definition. Transformational storytelling involves using a story to make a difference, implicitly a positive difference, to change someone or something for the better. Stories told well in particular ways have potential to make things happen, to shake things up. The change may be large or small,

temporary or permanent, actual or intangible, personal or public. Potentially powerful, transformational stories work best when told carefully, deliberately and responsibly.

Invariably I aim to satisfy the five key stages when structuring any story.

ENGAGEMENT. Engagement is attention plus emotion. How will I attract and interest my audience, to stir their emotions and secure their attention?

INVOLVEMENT. How do I keep that attention at least long enough to get my points across?

INSPIRATION. Can I raise their sights, lift their ambitions and fire their aspirations?

INFLUENCE. How will I inform and shape my audience's thinking, feelings and intentions? Can I convert involvement and inspiration into commitment?

ACTION. What actions will flow from the story, to bring about the desired change?

The most important decisions for the transformational storyteller are, what is my story about and what do I intend it to achieve?

The story that Cecil Jackson Cole told his three fellow volunteers on the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in the last days of the Second World War was a transformational story. They'd set up the committee to provide relief supplies for the Greek people, who were being starved by Britain's blockade of their Nazi-occupied country. Now news had reached them that the war had ended, so the committee was all set to disband. Then CJC told them, 'There's a world of need out there, so we must go on.' That's how Oxfam was formed.

Founding moments often emanate from transformational stories. The story that lawyer Peter Benenson told in *The Observer* newspaper in 1961 about two Portuguese students imprisoned by their government for raising a glass to toast freedom is one for sure, for it led to the founding of Amnesty International.

Though penned by William Shakespeare 200 years after the battle, Henry V's St Crispin's Day speech to English troops before Agincourt is a transformational story because it remains the most rousing evocation to men at arms, inspiring them to risk their all for king and country. Exhorting the few likely survivors to show off their scars with pride, the king inspired his apprehensive troops to unexpected valour by telling them that 'Gentlemen in England now a-bed shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here, and hold their manhoods cheap, whiles any speaks that fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.'

The equally thrilling story of Rosa Parks, arrested because she wouldn't give up her seat on the bus to a white person, that too changed the mood of a nation, so changing the world forever.

Since Twitter arrived in all our lives stories in 140 characters or less have often led the news, changing the world with the sheer weight of their instant global chatter. Witness the wave of change that swept the Middle East in the so-called Arab spring.

The Parable of the Talents, as told by Jesus of Nazareth, was surely transformational for its warning of the dire consequences if we fail to use properly the gifts and skills we've been given.

A single, appropriately captioned image can change a mood in a moment, such as when Amnesty matched that unforgettable image of the young man facing down a row of tanks in Beijing's Tiananmen Square with the headline, 'What are *you* doing this weekend?'

So, transformational stories are all around. They don't always have such impact and importance, though at times they might, and more even. Such stories are as old as life and as ubiquitous as conversation. They come in all shapes, styles and sizes. There's no right or wrong way to tell them, though learning to construct and spin transformational stories effectively will enable anyone to multiply the difference he or she can make. More examples, with varying degrees of impact and influence, will appear throughout this book.

Without thinking much about it I told my son Charlie the story you've just read, about the human rights lawyers in Guatemala. It transformed his life. That story has stuck with him, affecting who he is and what he stands for. Now, as a result of that story, he's changing the lives of others too and will do for years to come. Not to mention its effect on the rest of our family. Telling that story had influence and positive repercussions far beyond my expectations or intention. I now