

# **How to Become a (First Time) Storyteller**

**Share. Connect. Grow Closer Together.**

**Ann Bernard**

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## **Storytelling**

Telling a story is speaking out anew  
what you always knew you knew  
but didn't know you knew it  
until you heard yourself saying it  
and in the telling of it, you,  
the teller, become the listener too.

The teller and the listener  
together both discover  
the process of finding out  
what the story is all about  
as one draws the story out of the other  
and the story tells itself from cover to cover.

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## **Part I. The Backstory.**

### **Why and How I Became a (First Time) Storyteller**

#### **A Man on a Bench in Prague**

I stood frozen by my inability to reach out to another human being in need in a park in Prague. On a bench, sat what I assumed was a homeless man, and his pants were almost entirely soaked. A huge part of me wanted to go buy him another pair of pants and give them to him, but no matter how strong that desire was - I couldn't move.

I was keenly aware that my ability to reach out and connect to other human beings was limited. It wasn't in my nature. What I desired to do and what I could do were in conflict with each other.

I eventually began weeping. For me. For him. For being how I was.

My childhood had shaped me to keep to, and to take care of, myself. There's an age span where a child learns to feel safe, secure, and loved, which allows her to develop bonds with other human beings - well, that somehow didn't properly play out for me. I developed no real natural desires to connect, open-up, share, and create lasting bonds with others.

For the first thirty or so years of my life - except for a few people pointing this out to me every now and then - it wasn't something that concerned me. I was focused, driven, and ambitious. What mattered to me was reaching my goals and finding success in my endeavors.

All of my romantic relationships failed quickly and I didn't have much of a relationship to speak of with my family. Thankfully, being in the Marine Corps helped me to form bonds of friendship forged in commonalities unrelated to the normal sequencing of establishing friendships. Additionally, the demands of the military lifestyle excused not staying in touch which allowed me to have friends.

When I transitioned to the life of an entrepreneur, the people I met, and the connections I created were almost entirely transactional. They served a purpose. People didn't get much of my time, energy, or attention - unless they moved my progress forward. This included my family.

It was easy to wrap it in the pretense of what it takes to be an entrepreneur who doesn't have the time to socialize and spend time with family and friends. Not to mention, it wasn't something I even considered or thought about. It never occurred to me to call, email, or reach out to people - for the sake of catching up.

My entrepreneurial endeavors led to failures. The failures led to intense anger, suicidal ideation, and eventually my breaking point. My breaking point led me to my knees and handing my life over to God.

I established my relationship with God and learned about trust, love, and opening-up. Years of healing ensued to include much-needed conversations and forgiveness amongst my family.

Then I found myself on this journey where I was having amazing new experiences and exploring new places. And that's when my moment in the park in Prague, Czech Republic, happened in May of 2014.

I eventually turned my back on the man on the bench and returned to my hotel - my heart aching - praying for the help and opportunities to change my inability to connect with others. I had to find ways to change.

## **The Desire to Write and Tell Stories**

My lack of opening up and sharing who I was with others for 30 plus years didn't mean I didn't seek to know and express my thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Quite the contrary. I spent a lot of time expressing myself in stories in my head and through journaling, blogging, and writing.

Growing up, my dad told us stories of the Big Bad Wolf and of many other colorful characters addressing various themes. This one time, I spent days being afraid to go to the bathroom because of a story my dad told me about monsters in the toilet that would come out to get me when I refused to eat something (I can't even remember what). He turned just about everything into some sort of story for the good and for the bad.

This served to help me nurture a wild and vivid imagination. I grew up wanting to be an author so I could bring my characters to life and express my thoughts, feelings, and perception of the world through fiction stories.

However, I didn't pursue a career as an author since it wasn't something my parents could see as a means of supporting myself. So, I mostly just journaled until I pursued my entrepreneurial endeavors and began blogging. I definitely consider blogging my first go at personal storytelling.

Admittedly, I did, in fact, connect with people back then through my blogging who are still in touch with me now. I, however, didn't recognize or nurture those connections back then.

I remember attending BlogWorld and New Media Expo in October of 2009, in Las Vegas, and people coming up to talk to me because they were reading my blog. It was incredibly surreal and made me feel vulnerable and exposed. It was the first time I registered that people were connecting with what I was going through, but I didn't know what to do with it or about it.

As difficulties and failures increased with my entrepreneurial endeavors, and people wanted to know what was happening, I began to shut down and no longer wanted to share anything with anyone. I was absolutely not equipped to expose my failures, shortcomings, mistakes, pains, and struggles.

As God became the center of my life, and my life was turning around; I returned to blogging and writing to include self-publishing my first book on self-confidence development. Additionally, I was on the mission of fulfilling a dream of competing in a bodybuilding competition, so I began capturing the road to stepping on stage for the first time as a women's physique competitor. This included orally sharing my experiences for the first time through making videos.



Listen:

[Becoming Louisiana's First Women's Physique Winner](#)

I was beginning to open up and share through expressing myself more freely and I definitely was doing so quite publicly, but I was still not connecting and bonding with people.

Eventually, I stopped competing and left New Orleans to go to Germany. My blogging reflected this move as I now began writing much more about the incredible traveling God had brought into my life. Being in new places and trying new things expanded my world immensely. I was also growing, changing, and drastically improving my relationship with life.

After the event in the park, I began being more deliberate about communicating my experiences in person with people, but it was a slow process.

I was truly enjoying traveling and writing so I made the decision to make that my priority after leaving Germany, in September, 2015. To kick things off, prior to leaving Europe, I took a bike excursion as a research trip for a romance fiction story I had started.

The bike trip took me around the Midi-Pyrenees region of France through authentic medieval villages. I translated every experience I had through the eyes of my characters. While I did the trip physically alone, there were three of us traveling in my head.

I was excited to be returning to a childhood ambition, but I wasn't completely certain it was the right thing, until I met Airport Guy, and accomplished something because I opened up to someone.

### **Airport Guy. Dear Diary.**

My romance fiction story was based on an incident that had happened to me which had sent my imagination into overdrive. The female character was loosely based on me and the male character on a man I had very briefly met, so I lacked a thorough avatar for who he was.

I had been on the lookout for inspiration everywhere: at the gym, on television, magazines, Facebook, Instagram, etc. Nothing was clicking until a totally unanticipated and incredibly surreal encounter with a man at the airport, the day I flew back to the States from Germany.

He sat at the end of a wide-open row near the gate for my flight from Stuttgart to Frankfurt. I took a seat a few seats down from him. He was hurriedly writing on a notepad. He was tall, at least 6ft, broad shoulders, thick legs that showed even through his stylish jeans, short brown hair, but not the Marine Corps short hair style I'd grown accustomed to, with green eyes and a beautiful smile, which he displayed when we made eye contact. He was probably in his late 20s or early 30s. I couldn't tell if he was American or European. He was handsome in a wholesome and approachable kind of way.

He continued to write on his notepad and I decided to break out my Writer's Digest magazine. I needed to do something to keep from continuing to check him out and, more importantly, to keep my mind from thinking about my departure from Germany.

To my complete surprise, the magazine turned into an opening piece for him to start a conversation. He asked if I was a writer. I replied with a mixture of a, “yes, no, and I’m a wannabe writer.” He explained he was too, a wannabe author, as he pointed to his notepad. He was literally in the process of working on his story.

It got really surreal once I found out he was in the U.S. Army Special Forces (SOF). There I was, having a conversation about writing, with a guy who could literally jump off the very pages I had yet to write. Our conversation was paused when we boarded the plane and picked back up once we landed in Frankfurt.

As we sat by his gate, I surprised myself by taking a risk and told him about my story, including how the story originated, in the hopes I might be able to enlist his help with my male character development. He listened, admitted the genre wasn’t exactly his thing (as in not at all), and wondered why I selected a Navy Seal as my main male character and not an Army SOF guy but he agreed to help the best he could. I wish we’d had more time to talk, but he needed to clear TSA before getting on his flight.

We exchanged emails and then I left him to head to my gate. He occupied my mind during my whole flight from Frankfurt to Boston. I emailed him the very next day, since I’m not one to waste any time, but I also figured, if I waited too long, I would never contact him because this wasn’t like anything I had ever done before.

It took him almost a week to finally email me back. I never could’ve imagined he would become my living diary and the first person I began fully opening up to. By the way, Airport Guy doesn’t have a name because he is now in Delta Force and I promised him I would never use his name.

When he wrote me back, I was in the process of preparing myself for the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), an annual Internet-based creative writing project that takes place during the month of November. Participants attempt to write a 50,000-word manuscript between November 1 and November 30.

I spent the vast majority of November 2015 writing the rough draft for *The Hijacked Holiday*, emailing Airport Guy, and providing him feedback on his story.

He provided me additional accountability for getting my draft done, as well as insight and feedback on what I was writing, to include advice about detaching myself from my female character, and how to make my male character more realistic.

It was oddly satisfying and rewarding to work with someone on something so personal this way. At the end of the month, I had more than 50,000 words written and a solid draft to my first fiction novel. It would take me another year to finish the book, and to this day, it’s still a draft that requires editing.

Writing that book, and corresponding with Airport Guy, allowed me to make peace with certain parts of my life which made me realize how powerful storytelling is to our mental well-being.

I spent the next two years or so after that traveling and doing more writing to include some short books on a life series I self-published. Well, I got three books done out of six. (They’re no longer available for ordering.)

I went to Lake Atitlan in Guatemala to write the book in the series about my love and sex life, to Puerto Rico to write about health and fitness and the roles both played in my life, and to various parts of Belize to write about my entrepreneurial journey.

All the while, I was emailing Airport Guy and telling him about everything I was experiencing and what was happening to me. I shared how I felt, what I desired, what I was looking for - he truly became "My Dear Diary."

I expressed to him my raw and real feelings about everything to include: my mom's death, my faith, my breast cancer scare, my dating spree and the men I met, the decisions I faced about my career in the Marine Corps, and reclaiming the title entrepreneur in the pursuit of a new startup.

It was like, once I wrote it to him, I became okay with sharing it with others. It began to matter that other people knew how I felt, who I was, and what I was going through.

I never expected him to reciprocate the level of personal sharing I had chosen to do with him. I was just grateful he never asked me to stop emailing him, and that every now and then, I would hear from him. I was the one who needed a safe outlet to learn to open up.

After a few years of routinely spilling my guts to him, he wrote me back one day, and I had a powerful realization he didn't actually get me.

It was a weird truth to make sense of; that I told someone just about everything there was to know about me yet he didn't grasp who I was.

This realization made me aware that a story can only be understood from the amount of perspective, and commonality, the listener shares with the storyteller. It highlighted the value and importance of always establishing the plot/backstory to at least attempt to set the listener and storyteller on the same page.

The fact I had opened up but not fully connected, made me feel lonely for the first time in my life. I wondered if I would ever find someone who would understand and get me. It had never mattered before or occurred to me that once I looked to make connections; I might find myself disappointed, misunderstood, rejected, and/or disliked.

## **Being a Stranger in Other People's Homes**

The mission was clear since that day in the park. I was to learn how to open up to people, create connections, and share with them who I was. I didn't have a clue how to do that. My emails to Airport Guy were a good start but he was a person I'd met once at the other end of a computer screen. I needed to be able to do this with any, and all, strangers I met in person and to do it orally instead of needing to write it first.

My first AirBnB stay was in late 2015, with a guy a tad bit younger than me, during a quick trip to New Orleans in order to retrieve my belongings I had left there in storage.



Listen:

[First Time Staying in an AirBnB](#)

He owned his home which was located in the Lower Ninth Ward, an area I knew was far from safe, but for \$27 a night, it was worth the risk. He wasn't there when I arrived. His home was thankfully not a complete bachelor pad and my room matched the favorable description and reviews. He had left me a note to make myself at home. He came back later in the evening, once I was already in bed. I met him in the morning when I returned from running some errands. He had just gotten up and was making himself breakfast.

I was a stranger in his home which clearly didn't bother him. He greeted me with ease and asked if everything was to my liking. I replied that it was and then he inquired about what had brought me to New Orleans. At that moment came the opportunity I'd been waiting for, an opportunity to share details about myself and a current aspect of my life with someone I did not know in order to create a connection.

So there, around the kitchen island while he prepared and then ate breakfast, I opened up to him. I explained I had just returned from spending two amazing years in Germany and was here to retrieve my belongings I'd left in storage. I told him about the time I spent living in New Orleans and my experiences while traveling in Europe. I discovered what had brought him to New Orleans, why he had bought a house in the Lower Ninth Ward, and that he was a street performer who also taught some music classes. Before leaving, I got the opportunity to hear him play and he gifted me one of his CDs.

I left a couple of days later strangely satisfied with the connection, temporary as it was, that I had made with him. I had gotten to know some things about him and he about me.

I would repeat this process over 25 more times in the span of two years. Being a stranger in people's homes, getting to know them, and opening up for them to get to know me.

It also took a bit of a twist as I noticed I was, in fact, an oddity to the people opening their homes to me and a source of entertainment. I was a single woman, out on the open road, having adventures, and a rich resource of stories. I stepped into the mental role of telling stories to earn my keep. I now not only wanted to connect but I also wanted to be remembered. I wanted my presence, my stay, however short and my stories, to leave an imprint. I wanted to be entertaining and memorable.

My interactions with my hosts offered me an opportunity to hone my skills but that wasn't the only opportunity....

## **One Hundred First Dates**

I was learning how to open up to people, create connections, and share with them who I was.

I joined Tinder while traveling across Canada, and the U.S., which created massive opportunities to meet more strangers and work on establishing rapid connections.

This particular approach, however, began to backfire. My storytelling skills were rapidly improving and my lifestyle made it that I constantly had new material to work with. I had traveled to many different countries, explored and discovered many new things about life and myself, and I was constantly trying new things and meeting new

people. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the men I met were, well, living regular lives and they apparently didn't have a whole lot to talk about.

It hadn't occurred to me that meeting lots of people would make me realize the vast majority of people lived routine, boring lives. Tad judgmental of me, you say? We'll come back to this.

I took it upon myself to ensure all my dates would be at least somewhat successful by avoiding all interactions that only involved sitting down and talking. My dates soon entailed many outdoor activities, trying new things, or had some sort of unique factor that guaranteed I would leave entertained, and hopefully, with a new story to tell whether or not the company was the best it could be.

It's possible I eventually became a bit too obsessed with the value of the story versus the experience and the mission of creating a connection. Everything became about storytelling. I was either telling a story or in the process of adding to my repertoire.

Opening up, sharing, being entertaining, enthralling, and captivating was a breeze - all I had to do was pick the right stories I knew would appeal to my audience. My stories were layered in facts, details, and information about me but it didn't actually matter if someone picked up on the richness of what I was sharing. I was happy to simply entertain them. I had definitely grown extremely comfortable sharing all aspects of my life and who I was with others.

It has only dawned on me since starting the First Time Storytelling Broadcast that people aren't necessarily boring, but rather, they haven't learned to open up and fully share who they are in a storytelling format. They don't value the importance of drawing someone in, of painting a picture for the event they wish to share, of adding the spice of life - feelings and emotions - to their description and further personalizing things through the use of details.

Hence this book, the course, and First Time Story Coaching services I now offer.

## **The Journey of First Times and New Experiences**

I intentionally set out to try lots of things for the first time and fully live those new experiences so I could grow in my confidence and ability to connect with others. It does make a world of difference as a storyteller to have had a plethora of experiences and to be constantly fully engaged in living, learning, growing, and discovering all that life has to offer.

So far, I've shared with you my story from the lens of the why and how I embraced, and became, a storyteller. What you hopefully picked up in the background of the story is that I was also on this fabulous journey of first times and new experiences which enhanced everything about my life. I was in the midst of not just learning how to open up and connect with people in ways I had never been able to before but also discovering all that life had to offer.

Those are the years I learned to live and became an entirely different person.

Additionally, if you paid close attention to what I wrote, you will have noticed me frequently mentioning "it was the first time" or a version of those words. This is important because it highlights how a string of first times is part of the story of how I found myself

becoming a first time storyteller. The first times in our lives are powerful things to remember and understand.

The way I keep adding to my stories, and practicing the craft of storytelling, is by constantly having first times and new experiences. It's also how I continue to explore, grow, and learn; how I ensure I keep fully living and never end up bored.

I created the #365FirstChallenge to make it as easy, and as simple, as possible for everyone to start their own journeys of first times and new experiences to maximize what they get from living. You can download the #365FirstChallenge App from the Apple and Google Play stores and visit <https://365firstshchallenge.com> for more information.

As a reminder, you can hear my first time stories on the #365First Podcast on all major podcast platforms.

## **Are You Stuck on the Word “Story” or “Storyteller?”**

Before we go on, we do need to address if there's an elephant in the room. Do you only associate the word story to books, or movies with fictional characters, intricate plots, and what authors do? And/or do you think a storyteller is only someone with a wild and vivid imagination that's gifted with structuring sentences together to paint pictures?

If yes, we have our work cut out for you because we'll need to first deconstruct your association of what a story is and who qualifies as a storyteller.

Long before the written word, all stories were told with pictures on cave walls and orally from generation to generation. The stories used words, gestures, and facial expressions to convey a message and to imprint it in the minds of the listeners.

The stories varied from fables, folklore, and legends in order to make sense of the world, and the unexplained, but also simply for the passing of information important for survival.

I get it. You're probably thinking “Most books, videos, and courses out there are for authors, screenwriters, and marketers.” And you are not any of those.

Well...rest assured, that's not who I had in mind when I wrote this book. On the contrary, because barely anyone speaks about the everyday person becoming better storytellers that's exactly who I had in mind when I wrote this book.

To be a First Time Storyteller you don't need a wild and vivid imagination because you are recounting the experiences you have lived. No aspect of your story is made up.

To be a First Time Storyteller you don't need to be a writer. It's actually better if you don't first write out the stories you want to tell. I'll teach you how to outline them because these stories are meant to be told in everyday conversations, and need to flow freely, not feel like you're giving a speech or reading an essay. You don't want to memorize something you already know.

However, if you are one of those three previously mentioned professionals, you'll still get a lot from this book but more in regards to adding to your personal story repertoire, not your professional skills.

I'm talking about storytelling as a method of expressing, engaging, and entertaining through sharing who you are and what's happened in your life.

I'm not the best storyteller. I am, however, a storyteller, and I get better at it with each story I tell and each time I tell it.