

# Recipe for a Morning Story

Since January of 2004 WGBH-FM has broadcast a weekly series of short radio pieces called Morning Stories, narratives from ordinary people about some significant moment in their lives.

Our story tellers come from widely different backgrounds (they include an illegal alien housecleaner, a postal worker, tenured university professors, a retired high school teacher, a Cambodian immigrant, a blue blooded Bostonian, a Jewish grandmother, victims of domestic violence and seers of past lives), but their stories share a common goal -- to give listeners a feeling for what it is like “to be the other guy.”

In public radio, stories that make a strong personal connection with a listener are said to have “driveway potential,” i.e., they keep the listener glued to the radio even after he has parked his car. At their best, they also make us want to re-tell them, in our own words, to someone else. Whatever their style or subject, stories this vivid and infectious tend to have some common elements:

Most of us are not natural performers, able to tell a great personal anecdote to a stranger on demand; so, how do you get people with little or no radio experience to talk on the radio about something significant that happened to them in a way you just can't forget?

Basically, by getting them to feel that the experience they want to tell us is happening to them there and then. Human beings, I believe, are hard-wired to make sense of important experiences by shaping and passing them on in story form. The closer we get to the heat of the moment our story is about, the more lively, compelling and relevant the details of our account are likely to be.

One of the most effective ways of doing this, I've learned, is through an hour-long recorded “talk” with the story teller. Starting with the topic or experience he wants to explore, the story teller is encouraged to re-experience some of the moments and feelings that most moved him and move him now. In the course of the hour, we can usually get more than enough vivid images and incidents from which a three to six minute story can be edited. On occasion, a fully formed story takes shape on its own.

“Talk” may be the wrong word to use, for, my principle desire is to listen –with my senses and imagination as open as possible, for what the teller says that strikes a genuine human response and for what the teller has not yet said that might make the story take full shape and come alive.