

This is video of a fire, specifically designed for playback on your home TV, your laptop. It's a funny idea. It encapsulates the challenge we face – how to have 'fireside' conversations, in a culture where the environment is completely constructed. This footage of a fireplace is supposed to evoke the sense of being there. But let's face it. It's not really the same. It offers no authenticity – no heat, no warmth and intimacy. And for people desperately seeking those things, it is a bit a slap in the face.

A reminder of the void. A reminder that hearths, fireplaces, the place where families used to gather, have, in the westernized world at least, been replaced with screens.

But... as if that wasn't bad enough... The digital revolution, online viewing and the erosion of 'appointment television' – when we all sit together and watch our favourite show as a family, after dinner, at 7.30pm – means that we've now lost our screen centric gathering place almost completely.

Instead, we each have our own individual screens of various sizes, and sit in our respective bedrooms, on our own, watching, consuming media, consuming story as individuals.

Filmic storytelling, once exclusively experienced in a cinema, where being an audience member was a group activity, is now mostly experienced as an audience of one.

The purpose of this session today is not to bemoan the fragmentation of television and film. I love the fact that we all get to watch what we want, when we want it.

The world is very different than at the time of Baha'u'llah, when real live people sat together around a real live fire and told stories to each other.

The purpose of today is to examine and help recognize some of the story constructs that audiences – that is to say, entire cultures – now consider normal.

We have, in fact, had our brains trained to respond to media and story in a certain way. And I would pose, that our media savvy and media programmed brains are applying these constructs across the board in ways that we are yet to understand.

I propose that we pay attention to this – because these constructs are changing the way that audiences, in the western developed world at least, interface with us, Baha'is both when we communicate and tell our stories as an 'organisation'. And the way in which we use story to express history and spiritual concepts to connect to both others, and ourselves – particularly the way we think about story within the Ruhi curriculum. I'm going to focus mostly on Ruhi today. And we are going to do some fun stuff with some story examples from the Ruhi.

Ruhi is such a great example to use, because it so keenly embraces is the role of interactivity in learning. Given the proliferation of gaming, and how the psychology of gaming is now rooted in things like advertising, we cannot deny that this interactivity is part of the psychological make up of our audiences.

So, welcome to the challenge of the 21 century storyteller.

Quickly before we start, can I get a quick sense of the Ruhi experience in the room.  
Put your hand up if you've done book 3 and / or you are involved in children's classes ...  
book 4... Book 7...

Just to be clear, this is not strictly a Ruhi session, and you don't have to done any Ruhi to participate in what we are talking about.

But one reason I feel this is an important topic to discuss at this point in our process of entry by troupes - our growth process – is because the Universal House of Justice, in a number of places, including it's 29 December 2015 message, has stated that progress relies on quality. In order for us to increase the quality of our storytelling, we need to deepen down – to view it from different angles so as to question how we are doing what we are doing.

So what are filmic storytelling principles – why do they matter, and why do we need to conscious of them?

Now, even if you aren't schooled in this, you will probably find that it all feels strangely familiar to you.

If so, that might prove the point – how these ideas have pervaded the culture.

What do the Writings have to say about story.

Storytelling has always been a core tool of the Changeless Faith of God. Both the Bible and Koran recount stories as vehicles to capture ideas, and give form to concepts.

The Secret of Divine Civilization puts it simply:  
**“We shall here relate a story that will serve as an example to all.”**

**‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ** describes the Messengers of God themselves, as mirrors **Who tell the story of Divinity.**

This is very much their function.

The first filmic concept to be aware of is the difference between plot and story.

One of the earliest stories we have in the Faith, and the first story in Book 4, is the story of Bab and his time at school when the teacher asked him “to recite the opening words of the Koran. He hesitated pleading that unless he were told what the words signified he would in no wise attempt to pronounce them.”

It appears that the Bab is connecting meaning to what he was saying. He wants to know the meaning – the context – in order to frame the Koran.

Meaning is a core component of story. In fact it is very much the definition of the difference between plot and story. Plot is simply what happened. It is history. It is a list of events.

SLIDE

**The plot is *what happens*. But story, on the other hand, is *why it happens*, and *how*.**

Practically speaking, Story is a combination of factors that when presented to an audience, create meaning.

The plot is the meat and bones of the story.

The story is the idea, the general theme, and the interpretation of the event that creates meaning.

**The point is that we create plot in order to tell story.**

I am a writer and a film producer and I can tell you that I spend most of life developing 'story'.

Not making films.

Not even writing scripts.

In my experience about 80% of the work involved in a completed screenplay is in the story, and only 20% is about script.

A very common discussion between writers, producers, directors and even actors centers on: "yeah, but what's it about? What's it really about?"

I've spent years developing a World War II story based on real event. The first part of this process has been to design a 'story' around the true 'plot' events. Even though, the historical record is clear, this team of experienced filmmakers have spent years, and received tens of thousands of dollars of development money trying to figure out:

What the story is

what is the meaning, that is to say:

what is it actually about.

And this can take a really long time. Especially if you have something quite complex.

But in the end, all we are really trying to figure out is: as a storyteller what are we trying to say?

What we want our audience to feel?

How do we want to impact their thoughts about this.

And it takes forever. But it is the most important thing. And you can't start writing until you know the answers to these questions.

We've all seen films that feel very 'plotty'. A whole bunch of stuff happens. But you leave the movie thinking, what was it actually about? Most of time this happens because the filmmaker doesn't know what they want to say. And not knowing what do you want to say leaves the audience swinging in the wind about something to hang onto.

Why I think relating filmic storytelling to Ruhi is important, is that filmic storytelling is one of the primary ways the populous consumes and experiences story – that is to say, God help us, experiences meaning.

And the purpose of the stories in the Ruhi is entirely about creating meaning for the reader / listening / collaborator.

So I think it's worth up skilling ourselves on how to create meaning.

This idea of meaning is what Ruhi is all about. In Book 2, we are introduced to the idea that we don't really tell the stories of the sufferings of Baha'u'llah, we tell the stories of crisis and victory, of the concepts.

So the plot is the sufferings of Baha'u'llah, but the story itself is the story of crisis and victory.

Now, before we move on, I want to address the relationship to the historical record. Particularly because we are going to start to mix it up a little, and I don't want to wig anyone out.

Do we need to be telling stories? Is there a reason we shouldn't simply be telling histories? Give them without emotion, without personal context. To treat them like scientific subjects, information to be imparted.

Embedded in the writings, and now the Ruhi are the ideas of the difference between information and knowledge, and of facts and concepts. I put to you that we can draw similar comparison between plot and story.

That's not to say the historical record isn't important. The record must be impartial and clear. The role of the historian is essential. Absolutely. But what happens then - Once the record has been recorded?

There are many many films based on history. This genre is increasing in popularity for a number of reasons, not the least of which is economic – it can easier to get a film financed when is a connected to a 'brand'. Historical events are brands just like comic book characters are brands – they have pre-prepared audience awareness.

Take any set of FACTS about any historical event – Bahai or secular. As I've said, it's the job of us, the writers, then are looking within the facts, to discover the 'story'. The story transcends the facts, contextualizes them and provides a point of connection for the audience.

The Greeks posed that there are only 7 distinct stories. They have been and continue to be told and retold endlessly. Why can we do that? Because context and point of view changes. The world changes and so too does our relationship to those stories. Essentially, We change.

This is interesting for me as a filmmaker, a storyteller, and as an academic, someone who is interested in being conscious about myself and my work.

I'm interested in determinism – the relationship between how something is made, and the thing itself.

So the process by which we construct the story, says a lot about how that story is going to turn out.

WE are the determining factor in the stories we tell. The decisions we make about HOW we tell the story, creates just as much meaning as the source material.

And this is all about meaning. Because it is how we form that connection with audience.

This form of narrative storytelling we are discussing is emotive. That's its function, to impact the audience's emotions.

The rest of this session, we are going to look into the toolbox of the filmic storyteller – what are the concepts and techniques that we use to connect with audiences.

Very nuts and bolts.

We are going to look at a couple of filmic storytelling concepts today, then we are going to practice using them.

I promise I won't push you too far out of your comfort-zone. But you also might find that storytelling is easier, with a couple of these tricks up your sleeve.

Distribute hand out stories.

Read with neighbours groups of 3-5. READ NOW – it should take only 3-4mins.

Then we are going to go through some filmic concepts, and as we do, I want you to be thinking about the story you've been given and just read.

Because in a little bit, I'm going to get you to apply these concepts to the story you've been given.

## NUTS & BOLTS

### SLIDE

Connecting to an audience:

Emotional Arc

Dramatic questions

Universality (particularly specificity within universality – I'll explain that a little later on)

How we create these things is through FORM, and CONTENT.

### FORM

Structure

3 act structure

8 sequences

We are now consumers of media, that has been programmed about the way in which we interface with story. E.g. a film is 8 reels, now become the construct of how films are written - we are now trained into this rhythm. There is a reason you get restless at minute 12, or 24, when nothing has happened yet, because we have programmed to expect something to happen at those points. So this has become the audience's storytelling culture. Not just children, but anyone who consumes a reasonable amount of media. So not just relevant for CC and JYGs, but also for the adults that we are relating to.

Key tentpole moments

40 beats (that's the method I use)

The inciting incident – the hook

End of act 2

Story climax and resolution

Book ends, Flipped structure, flash backs.

Consider POV – 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> person. Eye of God.

### CONTENT

So many filmic stories are really small, yet seem to fill the big screen, and feel plenty big enough to justify taking 100 minutes of your life.

Story vs plot

Character based

When we do in-depth character work it's about making it real. Asking, what would a real person like that, in that situation really do? Say? Think, feel? Respond?

Drama is CONFLICT – somebody wants something badly and is having trouble getting it  
Dilemma and choice

Myth & Subtext

Look for the story within the story

Theme – specificity within universality

Core principle of specificity within universality

OR universality from specificity

SLIDE

Whale Rider, LOTR

Keisha Castle Hughes – nominated for an Oscar

### **So how do you decide which of these things to use, and how:**

Point of View of the storyteller – WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY?

“What is it about” – when we look at the Bk 3 story, first must ask “what is this actually about”.

Eg – can’t say ‘love’. LOVE is not a filmic theme that a movie can be about, because LOVE itself isn’t a POV.

And the modern audience require a POV, a world view. What is the story saying about love. Love concurs all. The power of a parent’s love... Love is hard. Love hurts. Love sucks. What does the storyteller want the audience to feel about love?

I think we need to consider that these topics in book 3 might need more explicit drilling down. What is the Faith saying about love, or patience. To many of our audience members, the more precise we can make it, the more specific, the more universal it becomes. I’m not saying that we take away the individual’s space for form their own relationship to the subject matter. Quite the opposite – that we encourage the participant to be very specific about their personal connection to the subject.

You are looking for MEANING

I recon, the more complex the better, even in Book 3 children’s stories.

????

I remember being on pilgrimage when my youngest was 7. ??? Walking up xxx street getting dinner, after the day when you visit the prison, and hear the stories. And you wonder how much a 7 year old is absorbing / taking in to an experience basically pitched at adults.

He had been very moved as we stood beneath’s Badi’s skylight – his older brother completely overwhelmed. So anyway, we we’re walking to dinner and talking about nothing in particular, and 7 year old Cameron who had been very quiet, suddenly pipes up in a ‘hold it guys’ tone: “so, they would walk for months to meet Him, and He would wave at them from the prison window, and that would be enough? That was all??!! Then they would just walk home???” Kids get stuff.

Why was it this story that he was thinking about.

He was also sort of incensed of the injustice of it all.

Identifying theme “what’s it about”. Now, one story can be about a number of things. And most importantly, the key factor in determining this is not the story itself, it’s you. 70 and 2 meanings. What aspect of the story speaks to you today says more about you and where your head is at, then about the story.

I know that when I write a scene for a film, the scene I write today, might look very different than the same scene if I was writing it next week. Context is everything.  
Hence determinism – the things is determined from where is it coming from.

OTHER thing I want to touch on is storyworlds.

What does this term mean?

We want to convey concepts and history to a modern western audience.

Ask the audience – what is a STORYWORLD

Note storyworld's can be both real, or fictitious.

Storyworlds – eg the world has rules, and a logic, the purpose of which is to create believability. LOTR, Marvel Universe

Storyworld's function is to ensure that within that realm, we believe that people / characters do, say, respond, their character arcs – that are true to the world and believable.

Question: how real is the world of the time of B and AB to our children, or even ourselves, compared to the world of Avatar, Star Wars or Star Trek. How visceral?

Story world building – making a world real. The Star Wars/Trek phenomenon is all about people/fans feeling that the world is so real, that they can touch it, feel, it, smell it – that they can exist in it.

What is the storyworld that we are trying to create when we are talking about the history of the Faith? It is a moment in time, or which there has been very few, when a manifestation walked the earth, and the realities about what that means/looked like/felt like.

When we are teaching the faith, or telling stories to our children, to what extent are we framing it in a story world way?

But how do great storytellers get their point across to the audience without coming across as 'preachy', so that the audience don't rejects the message.

Often it is about expressing the collective world view. Different characters within that world fall on different places on the spectrum. Some change over the course of the story. Some don't. The audience's final impression of the film, that they interpret to be the filmmaker's world view, is the collective balance of all the stories within the story world.

What is our world view that we bring to bear on the stories we tell as Baha'is – well, it is different for every person. Everyone connects with their Faith in a different way.

So, the question might be what is OUR story world. What is the internal logic of our world view.

Me personally, one of the hallmarks of our world view / our storyworld is **that everything, in essence, at it's core, is spiritual.**

Other examples:

He could cure himself with one verse. Read our thoughts. It's not science fiction.

Are we telling the stories like they are unusual, not of this world, they are on their OWN STORY WORLD.

The point here is that we know that something not being real, being fiction, in way stops the physiological human responses being real – adrenalin, fear, tension. What we know is these physical responses help root the content to the participant. They become the triggers for memory – for recognition and recall.

So the more real we make it, the greater the connection we will have with our audience.

If storytelling is about the world of the imagination, let's imagine what that REALLY WAS LIKE.

So let's get to it. HOW MIGHT YOU APPLY ALL THESE IDEAS TO A STORY FROM RUHI

EXERCISE

Read your story

First identify the stories within your story

Pick one

Identify/ Pick a genre

Consider POV, bookending, flashbacks, your hook

(give them 8-10 minutes)

You also have a genre list – If you are done I want you to identify some of the stories that you already know, and what genre you think they fall under.

Genre: Not all westerns are set in the wild west. There are certain components that make something feel like a western.

We don't glorify violence, but lets face it, Babi's carried swords. Many parts of Nabil's Narrative read like an action movie.

When we tell those stories, we can tell them like we are there.

Note: the intension here is not to undermine the elevated greatness and Holiness of these accounts/stories. It is to connect at an emotional level. And yes, you can agree that the story told as is, should suffice.

But the digging process you engage in to 'discover' the story takes you deeper into the heart of it's meaning.

## CONCLUSION

So, what does it all mean?

As Baha'is – we need to know our narrative. That might sound reductive, but it's true. I remember pioneering in my early 20s, meeting Baha'is in far flung corners of the planet, and one question that was a great icebreaker, and bond, was "tell me the story of how you found the BF/ became a Bahai".

This is the same Faith. We've all read the same books, gone to the same Ruhi classes. But there's something about telling and hearing these stories that have always moved me. When someone tells their story, it reminds me of my own. THIS is universality from specificity. This is what this collective storytelling experience is supposed to feel like.

Somehow, we need to capture this. We also need to recognize that if we don't have a narrative, others will create one for us. I don't think we want that.

Debate: do you give in to the audience, or rebel from sound bite size entertainment. Should we be trying to counteract it?

Finding Nemo – I'm not a fish. I don't live in Australia (that's right NZ is not part of Australia). But as a parent I know that feeling of fear about losing my kid in a crowd. And as a grown child I know that sense deep in my core of hoping that no matter what happens to me, my parent will always find me.

I might not know what it is like to live in the Bayou, but

**Tell your story into your phone – record it, and upload to xxx**