

'Stories from the Shed': Dealing with sensitive issues

Memories are often strongly linked through **emotions**. Some emotions are very strongly tied to **incidents**. In any case, the **emotional impact** is often part of why we **remember** the experience so well.

Sometimes those **emotions** can be **negative** and link to things like bullying, oppression, power-imbalances, and physical or emotional pain. They can link to particular incidents and experiences, certain people and sometimes, generalised periods of life.

Sometimes we feel better for having **shared** the experiences with **trusted** other people, and sometimes we seek to bury the incidents and feelings so they only surface subconsciously, but **sometimes**, just sometimes, they form part of a lived experience that makes understanding a story being told more complete. How do we deal with that when we are not sure who will hear or see the story?

Generally, when we tell such **sensitive aspects** of our lives, we **filter** the story depending on who is receiving the story. Sometimes we may want our families, or particular people, to know what influenced some aspect of our lives. The story they receive, for whatever reason, may be more detailed than that told around a coffee break with a myriad of listeners, or in *'Stories from the Shed'*. Sometimes stories need to be **differently told**, depending on the **audience**.

Sometimes we **remember** a person or people very clearly. Sometimes we could give information for an identikit **description**, even after decades, and even more often, we strongly and clearly remember the **full names** of the people involved. Identifying them can be easy. But we need to be clear about what we are doing and why if we don't want to attract **negative attention** to ourselves that may have us revisit experiences we usually really don't want to relive more than we have to.

We need to recognise that stories with **strong emotional aspects** are often also strongly **influenced** by how we **perceived** the situation. Often we see a **'them' and 'us'** dimension to a situation. We need to recognise that the 'them' folk may recall the situation differently. In the end, we usually really give a more powerful story when we focus on the **'I' dimension** of ourselves. After all, we are often most sure of how we felt about a situation, and less certain about others. Since we are telling the story, we can relate most powerfully by sketching the situation, and then focussing on how it had us, ourselves, feeling, and not dwelling on the 'others'.

A listener or reader who has **not shared the experience** and may not fully understand the context, has, however, more often **felt the emotions** you describe, even if in a different context. That can sometimes lead to people **sharing their stories** around the common theme of the shared emotions. Stronger links, and thus stronger story-telling, may more frequently come through shared feelings and understandings than detailed descriptions of situations and particular people.

What ways can we relate a negative situation given all the above issues. Some suggestions are:

- You might member the **full name** of a person who adversely affected you very well, but does everyone need to be exposed to that? Can you just use a **first name**, or if that is still too identifiable, can you advise you are using a **false name** to avoid any further aggravation from telling the story? Will doing this detract from the value of your story? After all, **it's your story, not theirs. Talk about you and how you felt**, not the detail of them and what they were doing so much.
- If the story is about people part of a group, and they are easily **identifiable through context**, is that information already verified and in the public domain, for instance, through legal or *Royal Commission* reports in the public domain, can you **sketch the issues** and then **focus on your 'I' statements** of your perceptions and feelings? That is your story, not someone else's story.
- Sometimes it is **entertaining** to relate some of the times **we made errors and learned through them**. Depending on the errors, and depending also on the outcomes, we might apply a filter on how much we say,

At the end of the day, talking about things that sometimes **hurt us can be good for us**, but we are **not obliged to bare our souls**, nor **castigate others**, just in the name of telling a good story. Be judicious, and think about the possible effects of the telling, then work out how you tell your story.

Lastly, and this goes without saying usually, if you have experience in something that included **signing away your rights of disclosure** and requiring you to not reveal some information without particular approval, sometimes even to legal officers, remember that, and be prudent.