

# **Storytelling Leadership: Connecting Our Stories across Differences**

BY KAREN L. GILLIAM

I CAN'T IMAGINE A SINGLE DAY WITHOUT STORY, WHETHER THAT story is a poem, the narrative of my granddaughter's birth, the anecdotes and reporting (some true, some untrue) during my first run for political office, the pleasant or painful memories that emerge from watching a movie or reading a book, the saga behind a tragic accident or the account of walking the path of the Underground Railroad. Though we all relate to stories, my interest in exploring story and storytelling leadership was motivated by more than the personal affinity I hold for them. As our world continues to become more complex and fragmented and as we find ourselves floundering in a sea of both personal and professional change, the need for understanding and interconnectedness is ever most important in our lives. And so we turn to stories, for they help connect our lives, and they help us understand one another and ourselves.

This paper explores one such story, of a woman who went on a journey and became a kind of storytelling leader. Meeting people, and sharing stories, she wove a narrative, connecting people across their differences, enabling the exchange of ideas and sharing of identities and sparking significant change in individual and collective behavior. This study, thus, examines a social movement through the power of story and storytelling, from a purposeful sampling of individuals who heard the story of Joan Southgate's journey (for a full-length study, see Gilliam, 2006).

At age 73, Joan Southgate, an African American grandmother, walked 519 miles along the Underground Railroad across Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and into Canada.

A Cleveland, Ohio-based recreational-vehicle (RV) traveling group, Lake Erie Travelers, heard her story and some of its members decided to act. Their RVs - the modern-day “safe houses” – supported her in the final leg of her journey. Ms. Southgate and those who helped her have inspired me to think deeper; to be true to myself, and to pursue the question that is mine alone to answer. She personifies the notion that we cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.

Through stories, leaders inspire, provoke, stir, excite, motivate, and engage others in ways meant to influence thinking and behavior. But a leader’s ability to craft a story is not in itself storytelling leadership. Followers must believe in the messenger in order to believe the message. Taking the power of storytelling combined with the voice, knowledge, multiple intelligences, and experience of the storytelling leader to unite a group of people with a common ideology who try together to achieve a shared aspiration is storytelling leadership. These four qualities are omnipresent in leaders such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), his wife, Coretta Scott King (1927-2006) and Joan Southgate.

**“THROUGH STORIES, LEADERS INSPIRE, PROVOKE, STIR, EXCITE, MOTIVATE, AND ENGAGE OTHERS.”**

Home, church, and community were the substance of Dr. King’s childhood and adult experiences. He conveyed his story by the kind of life he lead as a man of peace, racial justice, and fairness. Through the power of his example he engaged followers and helped spark the civil rights movement. His voice never wavered as he preached about love, equality, and non-violence. He was driven by his dream as his famous “I have a

dream” speech continues to live in our hearts today. Coretta Scott King was an inspirational leader because her story was genuine and grew naturally out of her own experience promoting peace and social justice. Touching the lived experiences of others, she will also be remembered as a strong woman who with grace and dignity overcame tragedy and held a family together. Both Dr. King and Mrs. King helped us to develop a sense of self and self-worth. Their lives make plain Drath’s (2001) assertion that all leadership is about shared meaning and the process of meaning-making across different worldviews.

### **Joan Southgate, the Storytelling Leader**

Embodying the four qualities of storytelling leadership – voice, knowledge, multiple intelligences, and experience – Joan Southgate is an authentic leader. Gardner’s (1995) view is that a successful leader senses the wishes of a potential audience and connects with them through the effective communication of story. Charisma often plays a major role. Many social movements are created around a charismatic leader. Sometimes we are awed by a leader and blindly follow the person. The great German scholar, Max Weber (1864-1920) was interested in leaders who had the ability to influence the behavior of others without the use of force. This is the type of charisma, personal charm, and character that enveloped Ms. Southgate.

I met her at the home of a friend who was involved in planning the last leg of her journey into Canada. My first reaction to her was a visual one. It’s quite startling how we imagine someone might look based on limited prior knowledge and assumptions. Her story of traveling the path of the Underground Railroad had become so large in my mind

that I imagined her to be of the same stature; but when she stood for our informal introduction, I saw that she was short, petite, and unassuming in her demeanor. What she lacked in height was more than compensated for in her presence, strength of character, and unwavering belief in what she was doing. Joan Southgate set out to increase awareness of a moment in history when people came together across lines of color, creed, and class to do freedom's work.

Thoughts of slavery, of her ancestors, freedom seekers, and conductors and their families had weighed heavily on Ms. Southgate's mind one morning as she struggled to complete her "usual stay-healthy walk" (Southgate & Stewart, 2004, p. 15). Why was this so difficult, she wondered, especially when her ancestors had done and experienced so much more in their perilous journeys to freedom? "How can I honor them?" she asked. "I'll walk their path." And so, she did.

When I met her, I found great comfort in the sound of her voice. "The provider provides what the seeker seeks, and the seeker seeks what the provider provides" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 36). It was as if she had reached into my inner being, discovered the lingering questions that stemmed from my own disconnection with family and ancestral history and fed my soul. We talked about these brave African Americans who risked so much for freedom and her mission to heal the wounds of slavery. As I listened, I felt a connection to my past that I'd never experienced before. Ms. Southgate's storytelling reminded me that rather than discounting or ignoring my heritage, I needed to recognize and reclaim its richness and goodness. I needed to know from whence I came, to find and reestablish my voice in articulating a self-claimed black identity, and then to support

others in finding voice, gaining control of their existences, and becoming all they were meant to be.

### **Report from the Field**

Stories, as no other spoken communication tool, have the ability to capture emotion and reason, hearts and minds. One consistent thread throughout all the many varied definitions of “story” is best stated by Bruner (2002) when he says that story is meaning. Meaning-making refers to the way in which people actively organize their own experience, and as according to Kegan’s theory, each individual experiences his or her world in a unique way; the same situation can have wholly different meanings for different individuals, or for the same individual at different times (Kegan, 1982, 1994).

The concept of connection – to our past and to each other – emerged from the conversations with my six interviewees. Their search for meaning rested on interconnectedness, a word that captures the essence of spirit. Palmer (2004) wrote that the soul wants to keep us connected and “persistently calls us back to our birthright form, back to lives that are grounded, connected, and whole” (p.34). As I met with each one and observed them in their natural surroundings of home, work and/or play, it became clear that each was on a personal quest, a unique spiritual and perpetual journey, for purpose in life. Each individual story was portrayed as meeting one or more of the four “universal human needs – living, loving, learning and leaving a legacy” (Covey, 2004, p.11).

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## **Living**

Where Ms. Southgate's journey held a noble purpose in honoring freedom seekers, conductors and their families, Earl, a member of Lake Erie Travelers, was simply paying it forward when he first met and decided to help her. Earl was sitting in his parked camper while his wife was inside shopping at a local thrift store when he heard a knock on the door. He did more than merely open the door to an inquisitive Joan Southgate who wanted to learn more about recreational vehicles. He opened the door to a passageway for the last leg of Ms. Southgate's journey into Canada. Earl cannot remember how they got into the "walk" discussion but he saw a connection between her walk and the RVers' love for traveling and offered to contact the president of the club on her behalf. Through this chance meeting and Earl's initial offer of support, the RVers became involved and committed to the journey.

To an outside observer, this might seem strange because Earl and Joan Southgate were strangers to each other. But to Earl, offering help is in keeping with how he views himself in this world. "I look at life like this. I was put here for some reason. It looks like I was put here to help somebody and I'm always helping somebody...I tell everyone that I have a guardian angel that looks after me and keeps me going straight." Years ago while on a road trip, Earl's "car just cut off" and stopped running. It was late at night when a man stopped to help. This good Samaritan drove Earl to a service station and returned him, and the much-needed car part, safely to his car. "He wouldn't take any money but told me to pass it on. Do to someone else what I'm doing to you." Earl has never forgotten the deed nor the advice. "As long as I keep passing it on, the Lord is going to keep me here to do things like that." Ms. Southgate's story was an opportunity for Earl to

apply, what is, to him, a basic principle of living: that we should help others without expectation of any type of payment.

Ms. Southgate's story also prompted Earl to ponder a growing concern: the basic survival of our young black children. He remembers camping trips with his children when they were young, where he'd "take them to the woods, show them how to identify different leaves, how to start a fire, how to survive. Young people need to know how people used to live, how they traveled from the south to the north, how they looked at the trees and stars to see where they were going." Perhaps with this knowledge, they'd recognize their own potential for creating a life of substance and character. "The average person doesn't know that the moss always grows on the north side of the tree." So when the freedom seekers were traveling at night in the dark, "all they had to do was feel the tree to know when they were headed right." Earl sadly concludes that young people today "don't even fathom life."

## **Loving**

Earl's first contact made on Ms. Southgate's behalf was with Howard, the then-president of Lake Erie Travelers. Howard invited her to speak at a club meeting. Hearing her, several families decided to join her effort. The time spent with Ms. Southgate was, in his words, spiritual, a divine love, grounded in a greater good beyond the self, valuing other people, and connecting with ancestors, and while in St. Catherines, Ontario, connecting with the descendants of Harriet Tubman. "People don't understand," Howard observes, "that this is knowledge that is valuable for us to have. You need to know from whence we came and you need to know about your history."

Howard described several occasions where he heard the spirit's universal whisper and felt its communal touch. "We went to several places that had an underground place. It was really something. It blew my mind. It shows that, to me, it had to be a spiritual battle." There was no other explanation, as far as Howard is concerned, for how Harriet Tubman was able to lead fugitive slaves and keep them hidden. "I don't know how she did it." But in the very next breath, Howard stated: "I know how she did it but it's just amazing. God had to be with her [Ms. Tubman] in order to get those people and make so many different trips back and forth." The same spirit was with the freedom seekers and the people that helped them. "We can't down everybody. You know there are people all over the world that would, that did help, that have good hearts. It is really something to know that."

Howard continued: "As she [Joan Southgate] walked this same journey, it seemed like that same spirit was with her to encourage her to keep going and also to encourage people to help her, that this might be accomplished and that people might be able to see it." On the last day of Ms. Southgate's walk rain had been predicted for the entire day. Though the day was gloomy and the clouds were threatening, it only sprinkled off and on and actually "lightened up a little bit." It was only "after her walk was finished" and as she climbed the steps to the church in St. Catharines "that it started to rain...God was there working with her as she completed her journey that she, Ms. Southgate, wanted to complete." Howard believes that this is yet another example of how the spirit moves with and for people. "It was just amazing. I almost cried. I went into the church and as a matter of fact, I did cry. It was really something. It was a great celebration just to be there with Ms. Southgate and to help her accomplish her last leg of the journey."

## Learning

When Bob first met Ms. Southgate, he didn't know what to expect. He received information that there was "some lady actually walking the route of the underground railway ... and it sounded really great...I don't know that I can say that it was the same for myself as the African Americans involved in the program," but as she started telling her story, "it was like an eye opening, like Gee, you know, here's a chance to find out a little bit more, something that we never had the opportunity to learn in schools."

Bob was raised in the Cleveland area in the 1950's and "there was no such thing as Black History." As a child, he thought the Underground Railroad was "some kind of rapid transit or something that went underneath the streets." Faced with the opportunity of learning about freedom seekers and conductors, enhancing his own self-awareness about the world around us, and "learning a bit more about the human aspect, rather than just reading a book or magazine," Bob decided to be a part of Ms. Southgate's journey.

It was also an opportunity for reflection on past experiences and pondering on the future. When Bob was in active duty Navy and stationed in South Carolina, Karen, his wife, came to meet his ship. It was 1965. "They still had signs that said colored and white and my wife went into the wrong one. An elderly black lady says: What are you doing in here? You're not supposed to be in here. This is for colored people, you know." This was a big eye opener. "My wife couldn't understand that 'cause we were not exposed to that. We didn't have that understanding." Much later in our conversation, Bob noted that: "If you don't keep telling the story [Joan Southgate's story] and getting exposure to it, you're going to have a lot of ignorant people out there. And, it doesn't matter which race you are either. Ignorance can go both ways."

Bob has a message for skeptics. “Some will say that was way back when - why do we have to keep talking about it? Well, I think you do. Otherwise you forget and people will have the opportunity to fall back into doing the things that are not right. So you have to remember. You cannot forget. A great deal of people will do what is right and there is some good in people even – no matter where, if it can be nurtured and brought out...When you give people the opportunity to do what is right, a lot of times they will step up to the plate and do that.”

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### **Leaving a Legacy**

“I had to be a part of it,” Phil explained, as he described Ms. Southgate’s journey as a reenactment and his participation as “something I had to do if no one else would.” He recalled what it felt like to be with Ms. Southgate. “I personally felt that Joan had me. I was with Joan but not just with Joan Southgate but with thousands of African Americans that were trying to make it.” Phil had been waiting anxiously for the day of our interview. “I love this stuff [history]. I’m a history buff so I love history, especially black history.”

He carries special memories from his journey with Ms. Southgate. In particular, crossing the Peace Bridge in Canada was “history repeating itself.” Ms. Southgate got off an RV on the American side of the bridge, because she wanted to walk into Canada. Phil and others had to go across first to get an okay from the Canadian government allowing Ms. Southgate, her daughter and grandchildren to walk across the bridge. One

of the officers said no. So the RVers asked to speak to a supervisor. By then, both the Canadian and United States press were on the scene and Canada opened their arms to Ms. Southgate, her family and those supporting her, allowing them to walk across the Peace Bridge into Canada. “You had to be there to see all of this happening. The expression of the supervisor on the bridge who said ‘oh sure, let her do this’, while one couldn’t have cared less about her doing it.” Together, Ms. Southgate and her followers and helpers made an extraordinary event possible.

Phil believes that black history should be taught as part of the school curriculum and not simply celebrated as one month out of the year. “If we don’t stand up and say we need to teach black history, who will?” This is the question, says Phil, brought to the table by Joan Southgate. Teaching black history is teaching the history of the United States and part of the legacy that Phil wants to leave.

My conversation partners made connections with Ms. Southgate’s story for different reasons, but all at deep, personal levels. Each offered a unique perspective based on personal experience. Their experiences and reactions show how listeners and followers take what they need from a story, and revealed how, when we touch the past again through stories, we can work to create our desired futures.

### **Qualities of Storytelling Leadership**

The story of Joan Southgate and the people she touched suggests how storytelling, which is a communal act, and storytelling leadership, which takes the power of storytelling combined with the voice, knowledge, multiple intelligences, and experience of the storytelling leader, can unite a group of people, forge a common ideology, and generate

action toward shared goals. For Joan Southgate, storytelling leadership provided a bridge over which different communities, cultures, and people could make meaningful connections. One of my conversation partners remarked that we may never know why Joan Southgate was able to move people to action, to the point where no other decision but to go with her could be made. The dynamics of storytelling leadership provide insight into the answer.

## **Voice**

Finding one's voice and enabling others to do the same is of primary importance to storytelling leadership. To a lesser extent in this study, the secondary qualities of knowledge, multiple intelligences, and experience, were touched upon. This in no way diminishes their significance but is reflective of the delimitations of the study.

Ms. Southgate told a recurring story that revealed her identity, underscored followers' goals and highlighted the values that followers - her story listeners - both espoused and enacted. Her stories helped the followers to understand "who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed" (Gardner, 1995, p. 43). As a storyteller leader, she understood and was sensitive to the need for meaning and served others by helping them find personal meaning. Her gift of grace was in helping others write and maybe complete their own stories.

With a steadfast belief in the goodness of people, Ms. Southgate set out on a journey to honor that goodness. She talked about how something told her to make this walk and how she experienced a visceral moment of truth. There is no one correct way to take this journey towards inner truth. But once voice is found and articulated, those

listening recognize the veracity, feel the congruency in emotion, body and voice, and are enabled to find their own truth.

**“FOR JOAN SOUTHGATE, STORYTELLING LEADERSHIP PROVIDED A BRIDGE OVER WHICH DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES, CULTURES, AND PEOPLE COULD MAKE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS.”**

**Knowledge**

Joan Southgate was believable and seen as credible and competent. Without exception, all my conversation partners noted how impressed they were with her knowledge of the subject (history of slavery and the Underground Railroad). Because leadership is an inside-out job, equally important is self-knowledge, the willingness and desire to take the inward journey and to learn from that experience. Ms. Southgate is a reflective woman and routinely stops and makes time to listen to her inner voice. Further, she thinks about her own thinking. For example, she questioned why she struggled so hard in taking her “usual stay-healthy walk” and stilled herself long enough to receive the answer (Southgate & Stewart, 2004, p. 15). Her practice and behaviors bear striking resemblance to the sources of satisfaction and demands for competence that Schön (1983) describes for the reflective practitioner.

**Multiple Intelligences**

The intelligence required for effective storytelling leadership extends beyond that of mental capacity or IQ. Joan Southgate exhibited four intelligences, as described by Covey (2004). Mental intelligence refers to vision. Ms. Southgate was a people believer

and hopeful. Physical intelligence speaks to the reverence one places on her body. Ms. Southgate was self-disciplined, focused, committed, and willing to sacrifice. She spent fourteen months getting her body ready to walk the 519 miles. Her hope, sensitivity, passion, humor, and influential nature are attributable to her emotional intelligence and capacity for connecting and resonating with others. She focused on relationships, on getting to know people of all backgrounds and ages, on being a bridge leader, on listening across boundaries of difference, and on teaching as well as learning. The people who met her repeatedly used words like “humble,” “respectful,” and “inspiring” to describe her.

Covey (2004) asserts: “Developing and using these intelligences will instill within you quiet confidence, internal strength and security, the ability to be simultaneously courageous and considerate, and personal moral authority” (p. 57). My conversation partners would agree that this statement describes Joan Southgate. In Covey’s view, developing these intelligences profoundly impacts the leader’s ability to influence others and inspire them to find their own voice.

## **Experience**

Ms. Southgate’s experiences were grounded in her faith that there is a force for good in the universe. Her personal stories and experiences authenticated the impression fostered by her storytelling. Her influence was spiritual and even magical, seemingly requiring more than human power as she gave voice to what her story listeners already knew in their souls.

Where experience is the best teacher, there are some lessons that cannot be taught; they must be lived. Joan Southgate prepared herself to be the change she wanted to see in

the world. Drawing on her common sense, insights, and practical wisdom, she used her life experiences – as an educator, social worker, community activist, wife, mother, grandmother, and descendant of slaves - to answer her soul’s calling.

**“JOAN SOUTHGATE PREPARED HERSELF TO BE THE CHANGE SHE WANTED TO SEE IN THE WORLD.”**

### **Closing Remarks**

Joan Southgate’s journey began as an idea, a thought that occupied her during a morning walk. The story of her journey and her storytelling bridged differences because it addressed a universal need, whether living, loving, learning or leaving a legacy. Possessing the qualities of voice, knowledge, multiple intelligences, and experience, Ms. Southgate, the storytelling leader, made connections across different communities and cultures because she was able to see, and say, what people had in their minds and hearts, to allow them to see something they had not seen or imagined before, to find hope and invite others to do the same. Her story suggests that these are the ingredients for enabling the exchange of ideas, the sharing of identities, and the triggering of significant change in social conditions and patterns of individual and collective behavior in a society.

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