

The following document contains rough notes. It is indicative and cannot provide all of the additional adlib material that will undoubtedly form part of the live talk.

About Stephen Mark Richards

Your speaker today is Stephen Richards. His early career was as an academic. Due to his diverse interests, he published over 40 scientific articles in the fields of Psychology, Medicine, Technology and Education. He is a Chartered Psychologist with a first class honours degree in Psychology, he holds a Master of Science degree in Computing and Mathematics, and he was awarded his Doctorate for his pioneering work into the design and implementation of multimedia electronic books, research that he started almost two decades before the release of Amazon's Kindle device.

He has always been a keen traveller and has hitchhiked alone around Europe, back-packed around Southeast Asia, spent time in African shanty towns and traversed both the urban and natural wilds of North America. He has had close encounters in the wild with bears and some notoriously poisonous snakes. Thankfully, he has not been bitten. Well, not so far anyway. He has written a number of books, primarily real-life adventure memoirs but also factual books, short story fiction and children's books.

More information visit:

Ampurlife.com

Learn how to Write with Flash

Write with Flash is a toolkit to help aspiring writers plan, write and analyse their work. The Companion book provides short stories, which aspiring writers can use to develop the critical skills they need to improve their writing and editing skills.

However, in this talk, I would like to discuss the relationship between, Learning how to Write with Flash, old dogs, Quantum Mechanics, the Waggle Dance and the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands in the Second World War. In so doing, I hope to convince aspiring writers that their story is worthwhile.

Learning

The desire to keep learning unites every person in this room. If this were not true, then this room would be empty. It is also important to realise that it is never too late to learn.

You cannot teach old dogs new tricks. That saying is one of my pet hates.

I remember meeting my father-in-law who had Alzheimer's disease. His brain scans had revealed enormous voids in his brain and the consultant diagnosed an extremely advanced state of the disease – that was several years before I met him. However, he was able to learn who I was and remember who I was on subsequent visits. He was also able to

introduce me correctly to other people. That amazes me when I consider my own problems with remembering names.

Also, the artist who illustrates my books: although a lifelong artist, she needed to learn new techniques and investigate new materials in order to illustrate. It is a specific skill. She achieved that, despite being over 80 years of age and suffering severe physical limitations, which directly affect her work.

People at any, and every, stage of the learning process have valid experiences to communicate to others.

Fact or fiction

Just the other week, I was taking part in a writing exercise where participants mingled facts and fiction. It was impossible to spot which was which. If anything, it was the more unlikely details that people claimed were facts.

It raised the question in my mind, what is a factual experience?

I do not know who you are, or what aspirations you have. Even if you are not interested in writing but love to read, understanding something about writing can still be fascinating. However, I am hoping that some of you aspire to write your own stories.

For all I know, there could be a novelist skilled at presenting fictional worlds sitting alongside a diarist who only ever records real events. What ties these people together?

Both create worlds, which other people can access. Both take what they understand about their experiences and record that understanding as a story. Diarists write what they understand of real events whilst novelists write about events that would be true if the fictional world existed. In other words, all stories must have a kind of truth, regardless of whether they are factual or fictional.

Reality and quantum mechanics

Now, I do not pretend to know all about Quantum Mechanics, but my understanding is that the process of measuring something actually changes the thing that is measured. In other words, you need to interpret what the thing might have been from the measurements that you manage to make.

If you imagine a tiny particle of matter and you try to take some measurement from it, you can only do so by measuring the energy coming from it in one of two ways.

1. The particle could be decaying. In other words, it could be giving out energy. In this case, we interpret what the particle might have been at the precise moment the particle emitted the measured energy.

2. Otherwise, we can fire energy at the particle of matter and see how much energy is absorbed. We then interpret what the particle might have been at the precise moment the fired energy hit the particle by subtracting the difference between the energy fired and that subsequently measured after impact with the particle.

In both cases, the particle is no longer the same thing that we set out to measure. It seems to me then, that even in physics, factual reality an extremely difficult condition to achieve.

In everyday life, reality is just as difficult. A mass of energy hits our senses every single moment. We select what seems most important at the time and try to interpret what all that energy means. If we then try to tell what just happened, we drag back what we remember and reconstruct it into a meaningful story. The receiver then reinterprets the story. At no time does anyone have full access to reality. In effect, a substantial part of memory is fiction. That is the reason eyewitness testimony is so notoriously unreliable.

If we consider hallucinations, it becomes even more problematic. The person hallucinating generates the same electro-chemical signals as if a thing were real. To the person experiencing a full-blown hallucination, the hallucination is reality.

Both the diarist and the novelist are telling stories about their understanding of possible patterns of action, reaction and interaction. In the end, it is only the writer's message and the delivery of that message, in other words, the story, that is important.

To quote from a film called 'Storytelling', it is from memory so it may not be entirely accurate but this is the quote, "once you write something down, it all becomes fiction". The job of the writer is then to communicate that fiction.

Communication

So what is communication?

To answer this, I would like to consider Bees. To state the obvious, bees are insects with insect sized brains. Most people would agree that, when compared to humans, insects lead less complex lives. Even so, bees are capable of communication. You may have heard of the bee's waggle dance. When bees return to the hive after discovering a good source of food they communicate what they have learned to the rest of the hive. They do this through a complex system of body movements to give directions to the food source. The direction of movements in relation to the hive communicates direction and the duration of the dance indicates the distance with 1-second duration being equivalent to 1 km. When I first came across this information, I was quite shocked. I thought, even the bees have gone metric.

I also found out that different species of bees have different waggle dance dialects. If we house bees with different dialects in the same hive, they eventually learn to understand each other's dialects.

Even Geordies from Newcastle and Smoggies from Middlesbrough, two conurbations in the Northeast of England only 40 miles apart, often cannot understand each other's dialects. Still, if you put a Geordie and Smoggie in a room together for long enough then I would like to think that they too could learn to understand each other.

So, what point am I trying to make? It is this. Communication is a natural and essential BIOLOGICAL FUNCTION of social animals. Writing is a highly developed form of communication and allows us to share our understanding of our experiences with the rest of our kind. It is, in essence, the same as the bees waggle dance. What makes writing even more incredible is that, unlike the waggle dance, sharing our understanding of our experiences through writing, allows the sending and receiving to be asynchronous. At risk of stating the obvious, the writer can be sleeping whilst a person, that they may have never met, accesses the writer's communicated understanding of existence. The writer can even be long dead and still be communicating. Writing, therefore, is tremendously important.

However, for writing to communicate to others, then people must know of its existence. It is funny then, that in order for people to know about our asynchronous communication in the form of our writings, all the writers presenting at this festival are using synchronous communication, in other words, talking to audiences in real-time, in order to stimulate a wider interest by word-of-mouth. It all comes back to the bees. The writers believe that they know a good source of nectar and have come before you to perform their waggle dance so that you know where to look for it. Of course, only a few bees will actually take any notice, but if those bees really like what they find then they are likely to waggle dance the information to others.

Writing for yourself or for sharing

Once we have decided to communicate by writing, the next thing we want to think about is, will we share our creative product with other people?

Many people do write privately. They never intend anyone to read their work other than themselves. An obvious example is people who keep private diaries. It can also include people writing poetry and prose for self-expression or even therapeutic purposes. From this, arises an obvious question: is this still communication?

I believe the answer is, yes. If a writer decides to keep their work private then they are still communicating with themselves. It can still be useful. It can help to clarify and organise our thoughts. It can also help us to remember and place new experiences in the context of previous ones. However, no matter how useful, I cannot seem to shake the idea that communicating to others is far more important.

A great example of this is the diaries of Ann Frank which were first published in 1947 but came to greater prominence when published in English in 1952. The interesting thing about

these diaries, from the perspective of this talk, is that Anne Frank originally used her diaries to communicate with herself but this later changed.

Anne Frank was born in 1929 into a Jewish family in Germany but the family moved to the Netherlands in 1933. That was the same year the Nazis came to power in Germany. Then, in 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands. Nazi persecution of Jewish people trapped the Frank family along with all other Jewish people in the invaded territories.

In 1942, Anne Frank received her first diary for her 13th birthday. This was to be the start of the now famous, Anne Frank's Diaries. Three days later, Anne's elder sister received notice that she was to go to the Nazi Work Camps. The family immediately went into hiding in a sealed room at the back of a factory.

Here we come to the important part of this story in relation to this talk. On May 20th 1944, after Anne had been keeping her diaries for almost two years, Anne writes that she has started the process of rewriting the diaries with future readers in mind. In effect, she realised that her diaries are important. However, she also realises that their format will not convey the story effectively to a wider audience. She is correct in both of these realisations. She did have a book in her based upon her unique experiences and understanding of the world, and it was worthwhile turning those experiences into a form that would communicate her story most effectively to a wider audience. A brilliant realisation when you consider that she was only 14 at the time.

Sadly, a couple of months later and after 2 years in hiding, in August 1944, someone betrayed the family's whereabouts. The Nazis deported them to the Bergen Concentration Camp. Anne Frank died early in 1945, just a few weeks before British troops liberated the Bergen Concentration Camp where she was held.

Anne Frank may have died, but thanks to the publication of her diaries, her understanding of her own unique experiences, lived on.

Desire, inspiration and determination

To sum up, I would like to outline three important attributes that I believe Anne Frank showed in writing her diaries: desire, inspiration and determination. I think all aspiring writers need these attributes.

Desire:

You should only write if you want to. It is possible that some people think that if they can write well, then they could become successful writers. However, even if someone has the potential to excel at writing, it is unlikely to happen unless that person has a real desire to communicate through writing.

Inspiration:

Even if you do want to write, can you find sufficient inspiration? Stories, factual or fictional,

are challenging to execute. Many people start by recording their inspirations and then start to write their story. It is only then that they discover that their initial inspiration is insufficient to drive their story through to completion. In reality, it is worth understanding that you will need to find a lot more inspiration on your writing journey. Your initial inspiration will never be sufficient to drive your story through to completion.

Determination:

This hits at every level. Even a book the size of Write with Flash probably takes about a person year of working hours (about 1000 to 1500 hours) to write and thoroughly revise. It is quite a commitment but if you really have the desire then you have a good chance of writing your story.

Conclusion

Finally, if you think you have a story to tell, and you have the desire, inspiration and determination to write your story, then I believe you should try to write it down. Perhaps you owe it both to yourself, and to the rest of our human hive, to turn your story into that very special thing, a book which can communicate your unique experiences even when you are no longer here to tell the story.

That, in a nutshell, is the motivation for Write with Flash. It provides a set of tools to support and encourage the aspiring writers amongst you, as you set out to tell your story.