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## Features

### Cover story: A storyteller for our time

By: [Tia O'Brien](#) -- SV Magazine staff writer



#### Storyteller Joel ben Izzy makes a point.

Photos by Patrick Tehan

*An Irish king asked his adviser three questions: How many stars are in the sky? How deep is the sea? What am I thinking?*

*The king promised three bags of gold if the adviser answered correctly. If he failed, then the king would chop off his head. The adviser figured he was doomed to death, until he bumped into the king's storyteller. "I can answer the questions," boasted the storyteller. The adviser was overjoyed and they agreed to trade places.*

*In the badly lit castle, the king didn't notice the switch and asked, "How many stars are in the sky?" The disguised storyteller answered authoritatively, "Your Highness, there are precisely 533,249,142,317 stars in the sky."*

*The king handed him the first bag of gold. "Very good, but what is the depth of the sea?"*

*Again, the storyteller confidently replied, "Take a boat to sea, drop a stone and the depth is one stone's throw."*

*The king rewarded him with the second bag of gold, and prefaced his third question with, "I'm going to miss you. Now, what am I thinking?"*

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*“Your Highness, I’m reading your mind. You’re thinking that I am your adviser, but I’m your storyteller.”*

*The king was stunned. The storyteller stretched out his hand: “My third bag of gold please.”*

“And the moral we can glean from this story?” asks Joel ben Izzy, perched on a stool amid about 50 intently listening men and women. Someone calls out, “When in a tight spot, subcontract!”

Ben Izzy taps his trademark fedora, curly brown hair spilling out from under the rim. “Yes, that’s one moral, but the better one is: ‘Consultants have a good deal to learn from storytellers.’ ”

That’s not your typical Irish parable punch line. But then again, telling tales to Hewlett-Packard consultants during the orientation workshop for new hires isn’t a classic storytelling gig—unless you are Joel ben Izzy.

In Silicon Valley, where out-of-the-box thinking is a requisite for success, ben Izzy, the Traveling Storyteller, has recast himself as a 21st-century business consultant with a small but growing list of corporate clients: For an Agilent Technologies’ vice president, he develops stories to help the executive convey his business vision. For the authors of “The Long Boom,” a futurist look at business and society, ben Izzy fleshed out key characters and story lines. When a San Francisco product liability lawyer needs to boil down a complex case into a story that will captivate the jury, he consults with ben Izzy. And Hewlett-Packard Consulting—the consulting arm of the high-tech giant—has recruited the 41-year-old storyteller to tutor its global team in the millennia-old art of communicating through stories.

On the surface, the idea sounds a bit too out-of-the-box—even for Silicon Valley. Why would you hire a guy who’s lived gypsy-like, roving the globe since 1983 in search of stories, entertaining adults and kids with tales like “How I Learned to Love Liver”?

In fact, ben Izzy’s résumé reads like one of the fables he tells. He dropped out of Stanford, and after many false starts finally discovered his gift as a storyteller. But then a twist of fate shattered his world. His unique experience and the wisdom it gave him turned out to be valuable for corporate America, where he now sells his storytelling skills and insights for \$2,500 to \$5,000 a day.

And he’s not alone. The low-tech art of storytelling is becoming a trendy new business tool.

“The whole game, especially in Silicon Valley, is brains and emotional energy,” says Noel Tichy, author of “The Leadership Engine,” a handbook on leadership development. As part of his leadership training, Tichy, a University of Michigan business professor and management consultant, coaches executives on how to harness the power of personal and corporate stories to convey their vision and inspire employees.

What exactly is meant by a “story”? The definition, it turns out, runs the gamut. It can be ancient parables and legends, a simple anecdote, or a full-blown personal drama. The goal is to illustrate the situation in a broader, wiser context. By connecting on a personal level, stories inspire, teach and problem-solve.

“Cognitively, we think in narratives. Storytelling taps into that better than bullet-point information,” notes Tichy, whose client list has included Ford Motor, Ameritech, Trilogy Software and Ariba. As Tichy points out, Martin Luther King didn’t use bullet points to bolster his “I have a dream” speech.

No one is suggesting that droves of MBAs are chucking mission statements in favor of fables. However, a surprising number of corporate chiefs are hungry to learn how they can transform quarterly earnings speeches into inspiring narratives. (At 3M, inventor of masking tape and Post-Its, business plans often are presented in the form of “strategic stories,” complete with characters, dramatic conflict and a convincing resolution detailing how 3M will be the winner.)

According to Nancy Kavanaugh, executive director of the National Storytelling Network, there are at least 15 storytellers working the corporate circuit, in addition to Berkeley-based ben Izzy. (NSN, located in Jonesborough, Tenn., has about 3,500 members.)

One of them is Loren Niemi, a part-time storyteller living in Chicago, who’s been doing corporate and non-profit consulting work for about 15 years. Recently, he’s been getting more calls. “Inside business and advertising firms, they see stories as hip and trendy,” says Niemi. “But they don’t have a clear understanding of what a story is.”

That’s especially true in the high-tech world, where ben Izzy is trying to teach his craft. “Engineers think that facts alone will tell the stories. That’s not the case. I want them to see themselves as storytellers who give wisdom and get as much back as they give. That’s the economics of storytelling.”

The consultant smiles at the simplicity of his trade’s business model, a venture capitalist’s dream. “If my ware is stories, I can sell it, yet still have it. And, I have more because each time, I hear more stories.”

### **Parables, not jargon**

When ben Izzy begins one of his workshops for new Hewlett-Packard consultants, he faces an audience peppered with skeptics. Many of these techies are more comfortable talking in buzzwords about switching from a TLS (two-letter system) to an FLS (four-letter system) than recounting how Nasrudin, the Turkish wise man, settled a dispute.

“The concept of ‘I’m supposed to go out and tell stories?’ That’s scarier than a systems crash,” confesses Lyn Dowdy, a Hewlett-Packard information technology management consultant and a fledgling storyteller. “In the business world, we stick with tech jargon because it seems more businesslike.”



**Agilent technologies vice president Steve Hoffman works with ben Izzy on his storytelling skills.**

*Photo: Patrick Tehan*

Ben Izzy's workshop is just one evening out of a weeklong orientation for the new consultants, flown in from all over North America, Europe, Asia and other consulting frontiers. He has a dual goal: Use stories to show these global recruits who must work together the common threads among their cultures. And demonstrate how they

can employ stories to problem-solve in a non-threatening way.

"The major reason to bring Joel on board was to bridge the distance between cultures," explains Debby McIsaac, HPC manager of global people development, who hired ben Izzy just as the consulting group was undergoing a rapid expansion. In the past year, HPC has added 1,600 new hires.

In the fall of 1999, ben Izzy's original assignment was to gather stories from HP workers and from his own story bag that would illustrate Hewlett-Packard's legendary core values for such a globally and culturally diverse group of workers. The result is a booklet, "From the Garage to the Globe," handed out to all new hires.

By January of last year, ben Izzy had launched his workshops where consultants are introduced to the idea of storytelling as a business tool. He's now done some 15 workshops for HP. "We think it's all about bits and bytes in the technology world. But there's nothing more powerful than the human being in the equation," explains McIsaac.

Ben Izzy's challenge is to show the technical consultants how to view situations through the eyes of a storyteller, framing information in the context of metaphors, parables or lessons gleaned from their own life experiences.

To ease his wary students into the concept, he creates a relaxed mood. After an informal pizza dinner, the consultants settle into comfortable chairs in a semicircle around ben Izzy. Except for the fact that he wears a fedora, the Traveling Storyteller could blend into the professional crowd. There's even a flip chart. "I ask for situations to show them that stories can be powerful business tools," he says of his technique. Like the consultant whose client had a fatally flawed operating system but didn't believe it. He came up with a story for the consultant to tell:

*A snake, trapped in a pit, says, "Please pick me up." The person replies, "I can't." But the snake convinces him to do it. The next thing he knows, the snake is wrapped around him, ready to bite. "You promised not to bite me," pleads the stunned man. Answers the snake, "You knew I was a snake when you picked me up."*

The metaphor? The system is a snake. You may get it to do all sorts of things, but in the end it will bite you.

Why would a client hear a parable better than a straightforward warning? "A story gives you distance and perspective," explains ben Izzy. "When you tell stories, even to the most high-powered lawyer or CEO, you're talking to the kid inside. If it's the right story to make the point, they let it in."

The idea of launching into a parable seems overwhelming, even silly, to some IT experts. So ben Izzy starts by asking them to think of something that happened as they traveled to the orientation workshop. Then, the participants tell their tale in small groups—for many it's their first performance.

"I never realized that what happened to me could be stories," confesses Ingrid Deneyer, an HPC project manager in Brussels, who, as she puts it, was not a natural-born storyteller. "Now, I write them down, and I've used two stories that happened to me in the last six months."

Deneyer is part of the HPC team in Europe running storytelling workshops based on what they've learned from ben Izzy. After a recent HPC gathering in Berlin, Deneyer left frustrated. Without ben Izzy's presence, many participants panned the storytelling segment. "It's not part of what they see as their working tools," Deneyer says.

But Magda de Jong, the people development manager for HPC Europe, is undeterred. "Storytelling takes guts. People won't turn around overnight," she stresses. "But management consulting needs this, communicating the message with the lowest barriers, with positive emotion around it."

### **God laughs**

There are many delicious ironies in the personal tale of Joel ben Izzy, but the most glaring is how the Traveling Storyteller, who shunned organizations and the nine-to-five lifestyle, ended up coaching corporate chiefs.

"People make plans and God laughs," says ben Izzy, reciting the Yiddish saying his father was fond of repeating. "God needs a few laughs," his father would add. Unfortunately for ben Izzy, many of God's laughs came at his expense.

He's spent much of the past year writing his memoir: "The Beggar King and the Secret of Happiness" is scheduled for publication next year. The title is a reference to the mythical tale of King Solomon, who was tricked into losing his wealth and happiness and spent what seemed like a lifetime trying to regain it. That's pretty much what happened to ben Izzy.

Born Joel Dickholtz in 1959, the youngest of three brothers, he was raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles, where he tried to imagine what was beyond, as he describes it, "freeways that led to freeways which, I supposed, led to still more freeways." His father, a one-time concert violinist whose fingers became crippled with arthritis, and his mother, a budding journalist whose career was ended by almost complete deafness, struggled to keep their middle-class lives from descending into poverty. Neither had time to tell stories, but his grandfather Izzy's tales were family lore. (Joel's performing name, ben Izzy, is Hebrew for "son of Izzy.")

A talented child magician, he landed at Stanford University, where his most distinguished accomplishments included playing trombone in the renegade Stanford Band and dropping out after his sophomore year. Ben Izzy opted to travel the world and live life, rather than study it. He envisioned a Hemingwayesque lifestyle, writing in some Paris garret. But once in Paris, he discovered he liked neither the loneliness of writing nor the publishers' rejections. Next, he became a street mime, eventually returning to the States, where this promising career ended on the South Side of Chicago when a Ford sedan plowed into him and dislocated his hip.



**Ben Izzy also works the kids' party circuit-like this Hannukkah party in Marin.**

*Photo: Patrick Tehan*

Back in California, ben Izzy enrolled at UC-Santa Cruz, nursed his swollen hip, and teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. He fortuitously read a newspaper article about the American Storytelling Resource Center, a quick bike ride from his apartment. This led to the discovery that, like grandfather Izzy, he was a natural storyteller. Which led to his re-enrollment at Stanford in 1983, where the gifted talker persuaded his English professors to customize a storytelling degree for him. Officially, it was called "English with an emphasis in creative writing and storytelling."

Over the next seven years, ben Izzy established himself as a global performer; he became a regular on the international storytelling festival circuit and lined up his own tours in Europe and Japan. In 1990, he married Berkeley psychologist Taly Rutenberg, but continued traveling until 1996, when, as the father of two young children, Elijah, 4, and Michaela, 1, he wanted to spend more time at home. Ben Izzy started growing his craft into a one-man industry. He averaged 12 gigs a week—schools, synagogues, neighborhood parties; he produced award-winning story tapes/CDs; and, with a partner, he launched his first foray into business consulting. Called Anecdotal Evidence, the service helped trial lawyers transform dry, legal evidence into story lines aimed at winning over juries.

His base of operation is a cozy office, tucked in the downstairs of the family's shaded, Craftsman-style home in the Berkeley hills. "At long last, I've found a career I can pursue just by talking about it," he boasted in an article he wrote in 1996 for the Washington Post. But, people make plans and God laughs.

Nine months later, in August 1997, ben Izzy was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. While it's considered a curable cancer, the storyteller needed immediate surgery to remove the golf ball-size tumor brushing up against the nerve controlling his right vocal cord.

“When I awoke from surgery and tried to speak, my voice was not there,” he wrote in a subsequent Washington Post story entitled “A Narrator’s Nightmare.” His vocal cords were paralyzed. Specialists couldn’t predict if his voice would ever return.

As he slipped into depression, ben Izzy’s life started paralleling the life of King Solomon, the Beggar King, who searched the world for his lost happiness, enduring the loss of dignity, fortune and people he loved. But through these misfortunes, the Beggar King slowly realized he had amassed a different kind of wealth—the gift of appreciating what he has, not what he wants.

*One day, the impoverished, hungry king caught a strange fish, cut it open and found the golden ring which had protected him from evil until it was taken by the King of Demons. He slipped it on and the Beggar King instantly found himself sitting on his throne, as though nothing had ever happened.*

It took an entire year for ben Izzy to “stop pretending that I have life figured out, and start appreciating what twists and turns life might send my way.” On the day before Thanksgiving, 1998, 16 months after he was silenced, he underwent an experimental medical procedure. The surgeon asked him to say something. Recalls ben Izzy, “I opened my mouth and heard my own voice.”

### **Corporate story power**

Two years after the return of ben Izzy’s voice, the storyteller’s business is flourishing—in unexpected ways. He still does the standard gigs for children—in fact that’s how I met ben Izzy. I needed a storyteller for my family’s annual holiday party. But because of his book project, he’s temporarily cut back on these performances.

And his corporate jobs keep multiplying—they now make up about half his workload.

## HOW TO TELL A STORY

HOW DO YOU KNOW if a story is ready for prime time? Joel ben Izzy urges his students to answer the following list of questions. He drew up the list when he was working with trial lawyers who needed to turn a complex legal case into a compelling story that would win over the jury.

- 1. Do you know the simple, one-sentence version of the story?** Ben Izzy quotes movie baron Samuel Goldwyn, "If you can't write your movie idea on the back of a business card, you ain't got a movie."
- 2. Do you know your audience?** If your story plays to their interests, it will connect with them.
- 3. How are you going to organize your story?** Instead of telling the story chronologically, try other dramatic techniques such as flashbacks or framing the story as a mystery.
- 4. Do you know your characters, including the villain?** Everyone loves a battle of good and evil. Know your protagonists and villains—villains shape stories and add dramatic tension.
- 5. Have you found the part of the story that makes people ask, "And then what happened?"** Every good story revolves around a pause, when you can feel the audience's interest mount. If you can take advantage of it, you'll reach your audience.
- 6. What are your most compelling images?** The more compelling the images are, the more powerful the story.
- 7. Do you believe in what you're saying?** Belief is an essential element in a well-told story.
- 8. Does your story answer the audience's question: "Why should I care?"** A story works because it makes us care about something or someone. If doesn't do that, then you haven't reached your audience.

Ironically, it's not the trend-setting, fresh-out-of-business school crowd who are contracting with ben Izzy. It's senior executives who are wrestling with ways to become more inspiring leaders.

The storyteller has a short list of business honchos who've sought him out because of what they've heard word-of-mouth. Mark Pinsky, CEO of Philadelphia-based National Community Capital Association (NCCA), an umbrella group for non-profit financial lenders, hired ben Izzy to coach him on ways to better tell NCCA's story: Why Wall Street and government policymakers should help these non-profits find money to lend to people in need. Millions of dollars in loans are on the line.

Says Pinsky, "Joel will listen to me and say, 'Did you hear it? There's a story in there.' " Sometimes it's a tale ben Izzy knows; sometimes Pinsky's got his story all tangled up. "I'll be telling the story backwards. Joel has taught me that stories are about solving problems. If you don't pull it together with the right clinch line, it's just ramblings."

"My issue is how to get the business vision out in front of people so they connect with it," says Steve Hoffman, vice president of Agilent Technologies' imaging electronics division. So periodically he and ben Izzy huddle to work on "a communication plan using storytelling metaphors" that "simplifies the message." As his division started diversifying, Hoffman needed to convince his troops that it was equally valuable to work in both the new and old areas of business. Ben Izzy recalled an old Chinese proverb:

*Parents can give their children only two things in life. The first is roots—a home that's safe and steady. And the second is wings—for flying away and doing new things with your life.*

Hoffman started using the proverb in his speeches. "I tell people if you're working in the 'Roots' area, your career can get

ahead because it's critical to our business," the VP explains. "For those working on 'Wings,' it's also important because it's allowing us to do

something new." The proverb now is part of the corporate language. "I hear people saying, 'It's OK to be working in 'Roots' and it's OK to be working in 'Wings.' "

Don Carlson, a respected San Francisco product, consumer and professional liability attorney, is one the few lawyers whom ben Izzy still advises. "Often times, the law is not interested in truth," says ben Izzy. "Trial law is about winning." But he feels comfortable with Carlson's work.

When Carlson is about to go before a jury with a complex case, he gives ben Izzy a call. Like the lawsuit involving a mother of three whose husband blamed her death on a product she'd used. (Carlson refuses to disclose the name of the product.) As the attorney for the manufacturer, Carlson argued that she died not because of the product, but because of lifestyle issues—including suspected drug use. After looking at the mock trial results, ben Izzy came up with a parable for Carlson's closing argument that demonstrated the theory of the case:

*A man is searching for his keys under a street lamp. A second man joins the search, and after half an hour, he asks "Are you sure you lost them here?"*

*"No," answers the first man. "It was over there."*

*"So why are we looking here?"*

*The first man replies, "Because the light is better."*

Carlson recited the story, then hit the punch line. "I said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the light may be better in this courtroom to blame the death on the defendant's product. But the real cause lies over there in the darkness of her lifestyle.' " The lawyer didn't have to wait long for results. "I knew it was effective when I said, 'Because the light's better over there.' Several jurors nodded, including the forewoman. We won."

### **Blessing or curse**

If you ask ben Izzy about his future, he's cautiously enthusiastic. After his brush with God's sense of humor, who wouldn't be? In fact, if there's one piece of wisdom he can impart to his corporate clients, it's that you should never be overconfident about your success—or failure. In today's wildly gyrating economy, Silicon Valleyites might want to consider the old Chinese tale that ben Izzy loves to tell about a man with a magnificent horse. Villagers said he was blessed.

*"Perhaps," he said. "But what seems like a blessing may be a curse." One day the horse ran away and people said they were sorry for his bad luck.*

*"Perhaps," he answered. "But what seems like a curse may be a blessing." The horse returned with 21 wild horses. Villagers congratulated him, for he now owned all the horses.*

*"Maybe. But what seems like a blessing may be a curse." A few days later, his only son was thrown from one of the wild horses and broke his hip. People expressed their sorrow for his son's bad fortune.*

*The man answered, "Maybe. But what seems like a curse may be a blessing." A war broke out and every able-bodied man was drafted. Only the man's son*

*survived.*

A blessing or a curse? As Ben Izzy knows all too well, you can't predict the ending to your own story. Put in language dot-commers understand, yesterday's golden IPO is today's stock catastrophe. Or next year's Nasdaq darling.

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