

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories Workshop

Justin Hilton – Everything is going to be okay.



David:

All right. So we've got a little boy in a boat. So why did he get into the boat?

David:

Hi there. This is David, and welcome to The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories workshop. We're so glad you've come to visit this podcast, where we delve into the process of creating a Sparkle Story. What you're going to hear is a conversation between me, our chief storyteller here at Sparkle, and a special guest. Our guests are people from all walks. Some you may know and others you might not, but all are conscious of the stories that we tell our children and their impact. So I ask all of our guests "What do you think children need to hear right now?". And we have a conversation that will ultimately lead to a produced audio story for children. We'll share a bit of that story here after the conversation.

Today, I will collaborate with Justin Hilton. Justin, in addition to being a father of two young children, is the CEO and Founder of SafePlace International, an organization which works with doubly marginalized refugees. Safe Place is active in over 30 shelters in seven different countries - and they offer food, housing, and support to the most vulnerable among the refugee population.

We are so glad you are here - and we hope you enjoy the conversation and the process. Be sure to listen to a special message from Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories at the very end. Now here's our conversation.

David:

Hi, Justin Hilton.

Justin:

Hey Dave McCann.

David:

Welcome. I'm really glad you're here. Justin, you and I have known each other for a really long time, and I think it might be almost 30 years. I know lots of interesting stories about adventures that you had in high school, but I don't know much about before that. Can you talk a little bit about how you remember yourself to be when you were a child, let's say between six and nine years old, somewhere in there?

Justin:

Yeah, no, it's great to be asked about that, because it's a period that I haven't spent a lot of time remembering. When you ask the question, what instantly comes to mind is that I was an only child living with my mom, who was quite depressed. So my companions were the animated versions of my stuffed animals. So a lot of times at night, I would be having these sort of congress tribunals of all the animals. When I look at it now, it's like I was doing my own gestalt therapy back at seven and eight years old and really working out a lot of complex internal parts through these adorable stuffies. That's kind of the first memory that strikes me when you ask that question.

David:

Oh, what a fantastic picture, and heartwarming and heartbreaking at the same time. Do you remember any of those stuffies?

Justin:

Yeah. They still spend time with me on the couch where I do the work that I do now with refugees, and my kids will come in and take them off on adventures. They will join their congresses and be part of their world, and then they'll come back to be with me, or they'll end up in some basket with lots of stuffies and I'll rescue them and bring them back to the sanctity of the couch here.

David:

The overlap is remarkable, because I know what you're up to now professionally. I think we should talk a little bit about the two biggest adventures from my perspective in your life and start, actually, with your work with Safe Place International. Can you talk just a little bit about that?

Justin:

Absolutely. So basically Safe Place is working with what we call doubly marginalized refugees, so folks that are not safe in the general refugee population. That might be women that are pregnant or with small children that were impregnated through rape or trafficking, or it might be LGBTQI folks that are coming from countries where themselves or the families were in threat of physical violence and often death for just being who they are. So with these groups, we started out doing protection, and we extended to protection and food and legal and medical. Then we realized that community and deep connection were the key ingredients to healing the kind of unimaginable and sustained trauma that most of them have experienced. So now our sort of work is a lot on building the community aspect and cultivating internal and external connection in a way that allows them to come back into their own bodies and their own skins and, in a sense, find their own narratives and find the potency and the gifts in their own narratives, because what is reflected back through the external lens is the horror that they've experienced.

David:

The name of it is Safe Place, and to create a safe place really highlights that you give someone a place in which they can be their human self, which is we want to help others. We want to be of service. I'm safe enough so that I can now help someone else.

Justin:

Right.

David:

Which, actually, I know this is a major part of your life, is this working with Safe Place, among a few other projects, but parenting. You're a dad and a reasonably new dad. Your children are still pretty young. So I know that that's a part of your life as a dad, is creating a safe place as well. I'd love for you to describe yourself as a dad. Who are you when you're with your kids and when you're thinking about your kids and when you're being with them?

Justin:

Well, my organismic impulse is always just to be present and to just not mitigate or stop the flood of love and joy that I feel in witnessing them. I think some of my greatest moments of joy are their continuous acts of generosity. Last Saturday, I was packaging up a bunch of clothes and teddy bears and food for a food bank that also gives away clothes and different things for families that are in need right now. Then when we were getting ready to go, Madison brought out four dresses, and she said, "These are my favorite dresses, so I know that there'll be some other little girl who doesn't have dresses' favorite dresses as well." It just struck me that she just cracked the model of devaluing people and then giving them the things that you don't want and introduced when we want to love big, we give them the

things that we value most. So I was just so moved by that and so inspired by our potential for generosity even at four years old.

David:

Oh, yes, and I hear a voice in the distance.

Justin:

Yes, exactly.

David:

We're going to have a ... I mean, we're having a conversation right now, and the conversation is going to lead towards something in particular. That's a story, but I'm going to ask you this important question. Then you may have thought about this, or your answer may just suddenly come to you. But I am really curious, Justin, what do you think children need to hear right now?

Justin:

Well, I know what my children ask to hear is that everything's going to be okay.

David:

Can you describe a moment in which they may have either with their faces or with the tone of their voice or their actual words or the circumstance really asked you to reflect that back to them?

Justin:

Yeah, my mother who lives with us, who's 75, right before Christmas, about 10 days before Christmas fell 50 feet in our driveway to the street. An ambulance had to come and get her, and she went into ICU. They really wanted to know, "Is Grandma going to die? Is Grandma going to be okay?" I could tell them without going into my mind, "She's going to be okay." I think that when they're constantly asking in the context of the pandemic, "Is this person going to be okay? Is that person going to be okay?," there's some non-cognitive place that I can speak and say, "Everyone's going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay." It's this unspoken kind of understanding that they're not actually asking about circumstances. They're asking about our connection and our presence. I'm organismically responding and saying, "I'll never leave you. I'm here."

David:

Organismic. I'm having a response to that word. So it sounds to me like okay, the state of okay that you're really wanting to transfer is an embodied state. Is that accurate, like a somatic state?

Justin:

Yeah.

David:

Can you describe okay?

Justin:

Well, I'll just describe it physically. When I start to see Madison or Griffin start to emotionally overload, I pull them into my lap and I hold them, and I just whisper, "I love you so much." Until their bodies return, we have a resonance from them being on my chest and spending all that time as an infant just heart to heart. So it's like our nervous systems calm together, and then they're fine. Then they go on with their day, and I see that when they're playing or when they're interacting with the world that is my job, is to be that resonant anchor.

David:

A resonant anchor. That's really interesting, the word anchor, the kind of image that it comes up. Resonant also, that vibrational, that sort of sound of a metal anchor. So I'm starting to feel a story approach us. I'm wondering if you're in touch with what kind of story you think feels the most true when we're exploring this somatic resonant anchor role of the story. Are we talking about a fairy tale? Are we talking more folktale around people? Are these animals? Is this an adventure? Are we talking land forms? What sort of images are coming to mind that we can start to play with?

Justin:

Well, when you asked that question, immediately what arose in me is an adventure tale where there's a recurring theme of connection.

David:

Beautiful.

Justin:

Yeah, and I guess I already get the theme of the story is in my heart, I can face anything, as if I live in my heart, I can face whatever dragons or dark caves might emerge. There's nothing that I can't face if I'm in my own skin, if I'm in my heart.

David:

Okay. So we need to learn this. What we're going to do is give a voyage and give a demonstration of arriving at that place, arriving in that resonant place of everything's okay. So we start. Most stories do start with a need to leave, a need to change. Something has to change, and sometimes there's a difficulty. There's a discomfort. There's a reason to move. So let's see if we can find our starting place by identifying our central character. Are you thinking of a person or more like an animal, or what do you got?

Justin:

Well, immediately when you said that, because I work with refugees, I thought of a young boy having to leave with his mother in a boat from his country because of a war or some dangerous situation and being terrified about leaving all that he knew and all that he was accustomed to for an uncertain future.

David:

Now I want to poke at it just a little bit so we can remove it from the circumstance that you're super familiar with or more familiar than most people and put it a little bit more abstract. We might open ourselves up to something that's surprising and interesting that way. But I do really like, because we started with anchor, and I do really like the boat.

Justin:

Great.

David:

All right. So we've got a little boy in a boat. So why did he get into the boat?

Justin:

Hmm. Well, there was some reason why he had to leave all that was familiar, and it was a difficult choice, but kind of a non-choice. There was nothing else for him to do but to courageously get into this boat and sail into an uncertain future.

David:

Okay. So I'm looking behind me now and seeing what the boy's leaving. So do you think we're on an island, or do you-

Justin:

On an island.

David:

Okay. So we're on an island, and the boy looks behind. We're going to get a clue as far as what he's leaving. What do you see?

Justin:

People on the shore that are loved ones, then the last sort of look at the coastline where he spent so many days.

David:

Okay. So this is something that the people who know this boy really well know that this is what's best for him, is he needs to go. Is that right?

Justin:

Right.

David:

Okay. All right. He needs to go. So we're out to sea and looking back, and the island's getting further and further away. He knows boats, I assume.

Justin:

Yeah, yeah.

David:

Yeah. He does. Okay. So a rowboat, a sailboat?

Justin:

More like a sort of dugout sort of native version of a kayak.

David:

Okay. So he's paddling. Okay. He's paddling, and let's both look ahead and see what does he see? What's ahead?

Justin:

Open ocean.

David:

Open ocean.

Justin:

Yeah, I mean, there's no other land masses within view as he leaves the island.

David:

Okay, and the sky?

Justin:

The sky is completely clear, and it's quite hot. It's beating down on him.

David:

Okay. So did he bring anything along with him?

Justin:

He brought some basic food, like a small amount of food, and a fishing pole to fish and some water.

David:

Okay.

Justin:

But he has no idea how long it's going to take him to get to the next place. He has some basic navigation skills, but he's a bit unsure.

David:

Is there a chance that he snuck something else?

Justin:

There's definitely a chance.

David:

Okay. Anything coming to mind? Any images of something that might be down there at his feet?

Justin:

It was something that his mother gave him a long time ago, and it was some sort of precious carved shell or stone.

David:

Okay. Yeah.

Justin:

He holds it in his hand when he feels particularly afraid.

David:

Yeah, yeah. Do you remember when she gave it to him, what the circumstance was?

Justin:

I think it was during a really powerful thunderstorm when he was around two years old.

David:

Okay. All right. So he's got a relationship to storms. So this little talisman, this thing really helps him, this carved out shell. Okay. Off he goes. He's paddling and he's paddling, and up ahead, he's not sure what it is, but he does see something. Do you see that?

Justin:

Yeah, it appears to be a ship, but it's a ship larger than any ship he's ever seen before.

David:

Yeah. It has the shape of a ship, but it's enormous.

Justin:

It's so big.

David:

Yeah, how's he feeling about this?

Justin:

I think he has a mixture of curiosity and fear, terror, because it's just enormous. It's like nothing he's ever seen before. It's metal. It's not wood. But he hasn't seen metal before.

David:

Yeah, and then there's the sound. So let's talk about the sound. What does he hear, and how does that make him feel?

Justin:

Well, he's still far enough away that all he can hear is the vibration of the engine, is what you and I know, but it's just making a low hum.

David:

Right. Okay. So the two vessels are getting closer. So his experience is the ship is getting bigger and it's getting louder, and as it gets bigger and as it gets louder, what is his impulse?

Justin:

His curiosity is stronger than his fear.

David:

Yeah. Yeah, instead of it being, "Watch out. It's a big, bad world," it's, "You have the potential to encounter something far more powerful." So they get closer, and he sees something, a person on the boat. The person sees him. I'm thinking let's go on the boat for a moment and think about that person. Who's on the boat?

Justin:

So it's actually a cargo ship from the Philippines.

David:

Okay.

Justin:

It's crossing over to some port in Africa.

David:

Okay.

Justin:

So this is just basically a crew member and not a high-ranking one. The crew member is young. He's around 17, and he's in an oil-stained red shirt with kind of torn pants that go a little past his knees and flip-flops that are really worn down to the sole.

David:

How is he feeling about his work? Is this something that he's grateful to have this job? What's his relationship?

Justin:

He loves to be on the sea, and he feels tremendous freedom. His superiors are not kind to him. They don't treat him in a great way, and he doesn't get so much food. But he loves the freedom of looking out to an endless horizon.

David:

So he can deal with it.

Justin:

Yeah.

David:

Any kind of injustices or anything that's happening that is unpleasant, it's still worth it because he gets to have this experience. I get the feeling, though, that there is someone in power that he can trust. Who's coming to mind?

Justin:

That's one of the navigators on the ship, who is I guess the third or fourth in command. This is sort of like you would say the science officer or the person that sort of steers them around the storms and is making sure that they're on course and that they're moving into the harbors in the right way and that sort of thing.

David:

A person of knowledge. So we've got these three individuals, these three folks. We've got the boy, who's in between and is making himself available to this higher power of the enormous cargo ship. We've got the person who spotted him, who is just feeling the gratitude for being able to be there. But it's not a cakewalk. I mean, there's trouble, but he does have a connection with someone who has a place of power. So he does know that ... Does he feel like he's going to be okay?

Justin:

Yeah, no. He's generally just excited and inspired and is not bothered by what externally might seem like bad conditions.

David:

You could look at his life. You could judge his life and say it's been a hard life. One could look at the details and say, "Wow, you've really overcome quite a bit." But he had a context and an optimism of looking at his life. Anything come to mind in terms of where that came from? Where did he get that message?

Justin:

I think that growing up in a really challenged, very poor area of the Philippines, he created imaginary worlds and possibilities. All these possibilities were accessible through journeys on a ship to magical new lands. So in that sense, he doesn't care, really, what's going on. He's just so happy to be living his dream.

David:

Yeah. Yeah, his imagination, this dream and his relationship to the imagination. Now we get to the man of knowledge. The navigator sees something in the worker. What would that be?

Justin:

Well, what the navigator sees in the worker is a brightness and an openness to possibility that reminds the navigator of his own youth. He's not a bad man. He's basically a good man, but he carries a lot of pain and a certain kind of resignation. So the thing that he's attracted to in this lower deck deckhand is the magic and the aliveness that he still carries. It's like a reminder of the flame that has gone out in himself.

David:

I think he witnesses something early on, maybe in a previous voyage, or maybe it's this one, but he sees something in this worker, in this lower deck worker, and witnesses that flame. What comes to mind in terms of how is that demonstrated?

Justin:

The people that work in the engine room are not seeing any light at all. This navigator witnessed the deckhand sharing the little food that he had with someone from the engine room, and he was quite moved by that, because the navigator, of course, can eat all that he wants and just was moved that in the context of repression and sort of a very hierarchical system that this deckhand was not operating out of self-preservation, but out of generosity.

David:

So we need to get the boy on the ship. What name is coming to mind for the deckhand?

Justin:

One came to me.

David:

What's that?

Justin:

Daniel.

David:

Love it. Okay. So Daniel saw the boy and probably not supposed to do this, but Daniel just immediately starts to respond, like, "There's a boy. We need to help the boy."

Justin:

Right.

David:

This is not an uncommon thing for this ship. It will encounter boats, right?

Justin:

Right.

David:

But there's something ... Go ahead.

Justin:

I was going to say so I would say that once he spots the boy, he runs to the sort of deck where the ship is operated and says, "There is a stranded boat. Can we stop and perform a rescue?", in more or less those words.

David:

There's something in the way in which it's said. There's some word that he uses. There's some way in which it's ... I don't know if we necessarily need to find it right now, but there's some cue that ignites a courage in the navigator to actually say, "Yeah. Yeah, we need to do this."

Justin:

He says, "There's a small boy alone."

David:

Okay, okay.

Justin:

Obviously, as you pointed to, there's often boats of people that are crossing, and the captain has a general policy of not stopping, not getting involved in refugees or people crossing or people leaving or any sort of thing like that. He's just about business. The navigator usually just doesn't speak up. But when he said "small boy alone," there was something triggered in his own past that had him say, "Shut the engines down."

David:

Yeah, yeah, and he could do that. He had that power, and they did what they needed to do to get that boy on the ship. Suddenly, the boy is in a foreign environment, but there is Daniel. Daniel is clearly there for him. So we're going to enter into a short period of there being a lot of questions for the boy, like, "Am I okay? Is this all right?" But there's a moment, and the image that's coming to mind is at night. I think it's a moment of connection between the three. So Justin, you've done the hard part, and I'll do the followup and land the actual language and the audio story itself. I can't wait to follow up with you and see your thoughts on what we've created together.

Justin:

I love that, and such an amazing journey to take with you and to experience sort of the magic of the unlimited potential of any act of kindness as it grew in this conversation.

David:

Truly. Well, thank you, Justin. For people listening, if they would like to know more about your work, where would they go safeplaceinternational.org. Is that right?

Justin:

That's exactly right, and we would love to hear from you. You can message us on the website. We love your donations, and they will go directly to the refugees, to food, to shelter, to essential goods. Yeah, no, also just support anyone listening in random acts of kindness, because we saw in this unfolding story you never know the effects of one random act of kindness.

David:

Yeah. Beautiful closing image. Thank you, Justin. It's nice to see you.

Justin:

Thank you, too.

David:

Hey there. David here. Now, the following is just a little snippet from the full audio story that Justin Hilton and I created together. Now, this story really ended up focusing on the three characters from the three very different places. So we had the boy, and then we had what became actually the captain of the cargo ship and then Daniel, the crewman on board. All three were connected and centered around something that the boy had. It was a special shell called a shankh shell and the magical sound that it made. This was a really wonderful experience, and enjoy this snippet.

David:

The Sound of the Shankh. There was once upon a time three very different people from three very different places who were all feeling very alone. There was a boy in a carved-out canoe all alone on the endless sea, there was an old barge captain all alone at the helm of his enormous ship, and there was a young man working his first job alone among many and missing his family back home. The boy in the carved-out canoe was named Tano. He was nine years old, and his mother and the rest of the community of his small island sent him in the canoe so that he could paddle his way to the big island of Guam. Like all the members of his little island, he was very good at paddling. You see, Tano's Island was in trouble. It was quite small, and it was very hot on the island. The rains they needed did not come as often as they once did.

David:

Tano's community knew was time to find a new home, but they could only send a few people to search for this new home. The islanders all learned many of the essential skills of island life, how to build and paddle canoes in the sea as well as how to fish. They learned this starting at the age of five years old. Any of the members of the island community were capable of paddling a canoe across the ocean to the big island of Guam, but they valued the youngest members above all. The youngest of them represented the future of the community itself. Therefore, since nine-year-old Tano was skilled enough and experienced enough to paddle to Guam and represent the community to the people there, he was chosen to go. He was fully capable to do this task. Everyone understood that to be true, but he himself sometimes had doubts.

Lisabeth:

Hi. This is Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories. What you just heard was a snippet of the full collaborative story that David and Justin created together. To hear the entire story as well as over 1,300 other original stories, visit us at sparklestories.com. The stories from the podcast are all free to listen to. You'll find them on the Browse page. While you're there, consider subscribing. You can start with an extended free trial when you use the code `storying, S-T-O-R-Y-I-N-G`. That way, you can enjoy all of the stories in our library as often as you like.

Lisabeth:

In particular, you might enjoy the story Angus the Camel from the Junkyard Tale series. It's about a camel that travels a great distance to enjoy a new life near the junkyard, or for older children, the Dory Horde collection about a family of five children who go on quite a globetrotting adventure.

Lisabeth:

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories workshop, was produced by Marjorie Shik. The audio editor is Nate Gwatney. Theme music composed by Angus Sewell McCann. For this episode with Justin, we are grateful to him for his generosity and his giant heart. I particularly loved how as the story evolved, it came to be about the power of small acts of generosity, because really, they are never small. We hope you enjoyed it. If you enjoyed this podcast, please consider following us, and then leave us a review and let us know what you think. Thanks for listening.