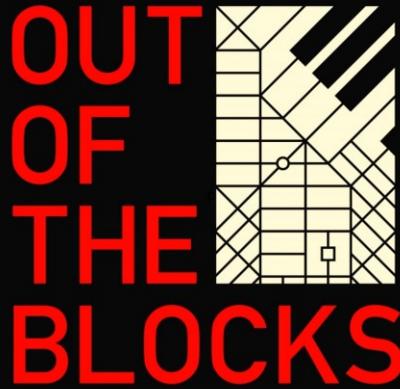


Fundamentals of Storytelling  
Aaron Henkin, WYPR Baltimore



Presented by the Peale Center

Thanks for the invitation to be here. “Listening is an act of love” – David Isay from StoryCorps.

So, I do a radio show & podcast that basically involves wandering around this city, one block at a time, and talking to strangers. On each episode of the program I make it my mission to meet and interview literally everyone on a city block. And it’s an interesting thing to do, to wander around starting up conversations with strangers. It’s not a normal way to live, right? Our parents tell us not to do it. But I can tell you, it can be a deeply fulfilling way to live. I’m grateful for any excuse to do it. And this documentary series, *Out of the Blocks*, *is*, for me, that excuse.

So I’m happy to be able to share my philosophy and methodology with you today. For those of you who maybe haven’t done your homework, you may be wondering, what is OOTB, exactly? So I’m going to start here with a little demo of what OOTB sounds like...

# People



Leroy Alexander on the 1100 block of Ward Street in the Pigtown neighborhood in SW Baltimore.

All the music you hear in our program is original music, composed and produced by Wendel Patrick, and all the photo portraits you'll see of the people we meet are also made by Wendel. OK, so I'm going to say a few words about the 'why' of OOTB

# A leap of faith



What we do on OOTB is a journalistic leap of faith.

It's sort of the opposite of how traditional journalism works: Where you normally would start with an issue and then go out and ask people about that issue, we just meet people and listen to them talk about what they want to talk about. This project is rooted in a belief that everybody has a story worth sharing. It's essentially an excuse to talk to strangers. And it's a license to listen.

On the left here is Clayton: He lives in the back of a van in a parking lot. In the middle are Mohammad and Umar: They run a carry-out called American Wings and Pizza, which is beautiful because no one who works there was born in America. And on the right is Katie: She contemplated suicide at one point in her life, but didn't do it because she knew her kids needed her.

# What's the agenda here?



People ask, 'What's the agenda of OOTB?'

And really, the more I've thought about this, the more I've realized that I've got quite a radical agenda. That is to say: I have no agenda. I just show up. And I listen. OOTB is an experiment in empathy.

On the right here is Donovan: He gave up a steady job to go into business for himself as a screen printer. On the middle is Shorty: He works at a tire shop. On the left is Ashley: She's a Native American Lumbee and a folklorist.

# Trust



OOTB is a project about trust, in many ways and on many levels.

It's about me showing up at your front door on your block and asking you to trust me, for no apparent good reason. It's about earning that trust, and honoring it once it's granted. It's also about an editorial trust in the implicit power of juxtaposition & collage – no narrator, you hear people in their own words and on their own terms. And it's ultimately about a trust in you, the person who hears it, to exercise your own powers of interpretation.

On the right is Bobby: He's a Korean immigrant to the US who runs a fashion boutique that sells wigs and hair extensions. In the middle, giving a boy a haircut, is Keith: He's a former drug addict, now a devoutly religious man who owns his own barbershop. On the left is Ayo: She's an entrepreneur who runs an organic juice bar and vegan restaurant.

## This isn't rocket science



One of the beautiful things about this project is that its structure is so simple. One city block. Everybody's story. You can apply this documentary model anywhere there's a city block, and that's what we've done for the past several years. And along the way, I've come to realize that, in the same way that each person on a block is like a tile in a mosaic, each episode in our series, each block, becomes in turn a tile in a larger mosaic, the mosaic of the city itself.

On the right: A bunch of kids there, hanging out at Hair Personalities Barbershop. In the middle is Crystal: She makes everybody breakfast at the Soul Source Diner. On the left is Hector: He used to be in a gang in Guatemala. Now, he runs a Christian internet radio station out of a neighborhood bookstore.

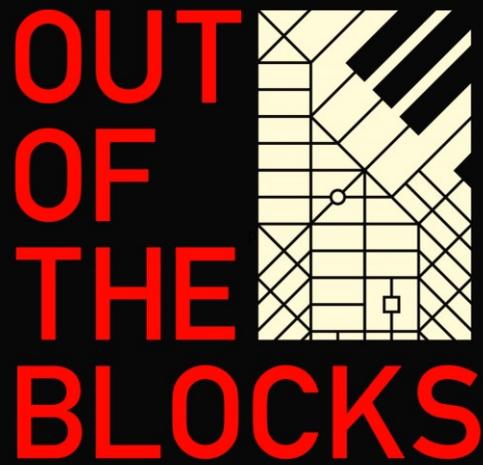
# The city is an anthology



People ask us, what have you learned about Baltimore's story from this project? And honestly, what I think we've learned is that Baltimore doesn't have a story. This city is not a novel. You can't read it like that with any hope of understanding it. This city is an anthology. It's an anthology made up of hundreds of thousands of life-stories, and no individual life-story, and no individual block, even, can tell the story of Baltimore. The story of Baltimore is in the juxtaposition of all of us together, all at once, everything that makes us laugh and everything that makes us cry, the sum total of all of our disparate hopes and fears.

On the right is Mike: He's worked for 14 years behind a lunch counter and never missed a day. In the middle there is Aurora: She's a professional Muy Thai MMA fighter. And on the left is Michael: He's the guy who gets up early and makes the donuts at a local bakery.

## Out of the Blocks Project



That's the 'why' of OOTB, in a nutshell. The 'how' of OOTB is an interesting story in itself, and it continues to be a work in progress. I'll take you behind the curtain here for a few minutes and tell you a bit about the methodology behind this project.

# The interview



When you do an interview, the questions you ask are important, of course. But, listening to the answers is even more important. This kind of interviewing is like fishing. Each question is like casting a line in the water. Watch the bobber. You'll get some nibbles. Keep casting. If you're lucky, you'll eventually get a BITE (and in the interest of moving things along here, I'm going to stop narrating who each of these folks are in the photo . . . you have to listen to our podcast to find out!)

On the right is Marco: His son & daughter were killed in a gang turf war. In the middle are Reuben and Patty: They're Mennonites who moved to Baltimore from rural Pennsylvania to start a Christian school. On the right is Andwele: He's a barber, but he has a music studio in the back of his barbershop and makes music when he isn't busy with customers.

## Interviewing for narrative arc



You've got a beautiful fish on the line now -a meaningful, compelling story. It's time to reel it in. Take your time. You're still wearing the hat of interviewer, but you're actually now a story coach. Now that you know there's a story there, your job is to help your interviewee tell it well.

## Good stories have two main ingredients



An **anecdote** is the sequence of actions that builds the momentum and raises questions to be answered. Stringing together a series of actions (this happens, and then this happens) makes the audience feel that they are moving toward a destination.

The **reflection** is the moment when someone clearly says, “This is the point of the story.”

## Coaching the anecdote



Assume the language of a movie director. Ask your storyteller to rewind and establish the scene at the beginning of the anecdote. Have your storyteller pause and zoom in on important parts of the action as they unfold from there.

Have your storyteller re-imagine important parts of the story from the other characters' perspectives. This is like collecting multiple camera angles. Don't be afraid to ask the same questions over and over, in different ways. Solicit sensory details.

# Coaching the reflection



Help your storyteller verbalize the significance of her/his story:

Ask: What do you think you learned from that experience?

Ask: How do you think it changed who you are as a person?

Ask: What's the moral of your story?

# The essential question



Every question you ask is just another way of getting at one essential question: “Tell me a story about your life that helps me understand who you are as a person.”

# The secret wish of the soul

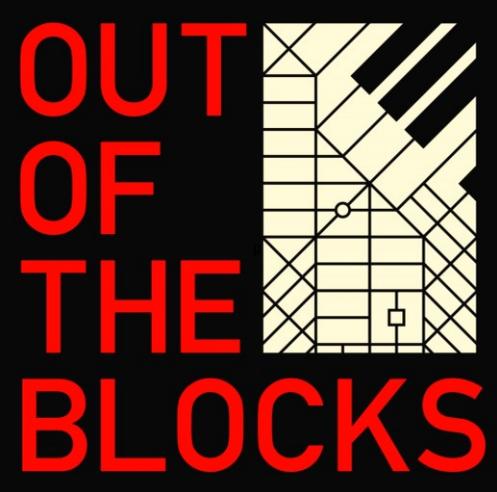


There's a theory out there that, "It's the secret wish of the soul to be interviewed."

No matter how skeptical someone is, at some level they're curious about participating. When folks realize that your only agenda is to be a patient, active listener, there's no limit to what can happen next. It's deeply validating, I think, to have someone take a genuine interest in you as a person, no matter who you are, whether you're Dawan, the guy on the right here, who's getting turned down for jobs because he has a criminal record. Or whether you're Bishme, who ended up becoming a fashion designer even though his parents wanted him to be a football star. Or whether you're Alex, who works as a shoe repairman, a cobbler from Russia who needs to close his business because people just buy new shoes now instead of getting their old ones mended.

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**OUT  
OF  
THE  
BLOCKS**



The poet Muriel Ruckeyser said, “The universe is made of stories, not atoms.”

I believe that stories are the single most important tools we have for shaping our reality. Stories put us in the minds and eyes and hearts of other human beings. They are vehicles for empathy. And empathy is a value, I think, worth cultivating in ourselves every day.

OK, we’re going to do an activity in the second half of our time together today, but I did build some time in here right now to just listen to you, to hear what your goals are for this class, what your assignments are, and to just be a resource for you and answer any questions you might have about interviewing, recording, producing. Or any questions you might have about public radio or podcasting. What’s on your mind? How can I best be a resource for you?