



Stories waiting to be told

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"Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here." – Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*

Long ago, someone had told me, "There is a story in every person. A story waiting to be shared." Years later, I got to know Siddharth Maskeri, an animator, creator and storyteller who has dedicated his life to help people tell their stories.

Siddharth and his wife Smriti conceived Soulify to encourage individuals to empower themselves by identifying and connecting with the creator within. In a short span of a year, they have reached out to children from various socioeconomic backgrounds, homeschoolers, unschoolers, Udaipur jail inmates and people wanting to explore and share their creativity. Their initiatives under the Soulify umbrella – Creators Connect, Story Bus, Creators Envisioning Forum, I-Literature, Theatre of Relevance, Nature and Awareness sessions and Storytellers Learning Centre – have been designed to bring to life stories hidden in the minds of people.

"Soulify gives a platform to people to showcase their creativity. The tagline – Bringing ideas to life – aptly describes the efforts of this novel venture. "Change is an eternal romance between the creator (energy) and the creation (matter). We prefer to call it transformation. Through our workshops, our participants connect with the creator hidden inside them and develop the power to transform their creations, starting with the self," says Siddharth. The aim is to encourage individuals to imagine, innovate and create and not become mere robots efficient at carrying out instructions. The focus is on the idea, the thought and the story waiting to be shared. Language, grammar, spelling, drawing techniques are secondary. Soulify's effort is to help people break their internal barriers and express their minds. In the words of Manjul Bhardwaj, noted theatre personality, creator of 'Theatre of Relevance' (TOR) and mentor, "Soulify – Bringing Ideas to Life – is a wonderful initiative which makes the world better and humane by facilitating the artistic persona of individuals and groups through innovative and creative interventions!"



Smriti at a teachers' theatre workshop in Delhi

Through their initiative – **Creators Connect**, Siddharth and Smriti aim to bring together a community for creative and artistic expression. Over the last one year, creators have gathered together to create and indulge in their artistic expression through various mediums – storytelling, animation, illustrations, painting, craftwork, handwork and cooking. People have explored, experimented and shared their skills and talent during these meetings every Sunday at Siddharth and Smriti's home.

Creators Envisioning Forum is an initiative designed for creators and

entrepreneurs to share their vision through a facilitated creative process and explore ways to collaborate and support each other in their journey. It is designed to amplify the potential of each participant through experience sharing, vision mapping, identifying challenges and transforming possibilities. A frequent member of the Creator's community said, "I can feel the warmth and connectivity with the family which drags me here most of the times. Innovative, crazy, creative ideas can be converted into reality with the Soulify family. I have created memories for life."

Story Bus is a time specific therapeutic creative workshop that facilitates self discovery, compassion building and vision building through soulful writing and storytelling. It is a voyage into our self, our struggles and the universe we live in, to experience it from the creator's perspective and share it as an inspiring story with the community. Through this meditative and healing process the team hopes to spread compassion and contentment in the increasingly consumerist and competitive world. Story Bus is all about storytelling through art, creative writing, animation and performance. It encourages participants to draw inspiration from their own life experiences. In the process, participants imbibe the art of seeing life as a story, which significantly empowers them to find solutions to their challenges creatively.

Over the past one year, Soulify has conducted over 50 workshops reaching out to more than 1000 participants across the country. The participants have been of all ages from diverse social, cultural and financial backgrounds – orphans, tribal children, government school students, prisoners, children at self-directed learning centres, academic authors, professionals at animation studios and students from animation institutes.

I-literature is an effort to bring literature out of its academic limitations and the clutches of the privileged few to the masses, where the masses redefine literature as a medium to express themselves through stories in diverse languages, dialects, and forms. They have compiled their first book in the series of I-Literature books. It is a book created through the Story Bus workshop.

Some of Soulify's other initiatives include 'Theater of Relevance' (TOR) workshops based on the philosophy of theatre thinker, Manjul Bhardwaj. It is a laboratory for human processes, and encourages bringing constructive change by connecting life to drama and awakening

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theatrical consciousness. **Nature and Awareness** sessions aim at connecting participants with the nature around and within through joyous walks, art and craft, reflection sessions, and games.

Every workshop Siddharth and Smriti conduct is different and keeps in mind the uniqueness of the group as well as each participating individual. According to Siddharth, "Every workshop we have conducted has been challenging. Purely because we don't teach or preach techniques, but we reach out to the darkest, blocked and hidden areas of the participant's minds to discover and facilitate the expression of their inspiring story. And every mind is complex and unique. In every workshop we have multi-dimensional aha moments when we discover a new exciting, compassionate perspective to the same universe we have created."

There is immense power in the StoryBus workshops facilitated by Soulify. For both Siddharth and Smriti, their workshops create new insights, meaning and perspectives. While recollecting their experience during a workshop with 3D animation course students, they shared, "Products of the highly competitive world, the students were conditioned to compete and aim for the top job available. Our first goal was to break this conditioning and get the students to put their guards down and then we focused on 'awakening the child within' and work with a fresh, fear-less child like mind. The group worked with more acceptance and compassion toward their mates, compiled and shared their film in the convocation display." During another workshop with orphans their initial work focused on exploring the concept of 'perfection.' Having helped the children understand that they were unique and complete and that everyone has strengths, limitations and their own struggles, they moved on to help the kids bring their stories alive.

One of their most challenging engagements was with the Udaipur jail inmates. In Siddharth's words, "I had no clue about the challenges I was going to face. All I knew from my previous experiences is that I had to connect with my participants at the human level and get to know their story with the openness that the story they share is their truth. I created a comfortable space for them to share their struggles by talking about my own. The unanimous decision of the participants to write a story around the concept of freedom itself was an inspiring moment. I realized that the participants were highly aware of their actions and were no longer in a state of denial. They even identified that this process of reflection and writing the story has given them perspective about their actions and the changes they need to bring about in their lives once they are released.



Siddharth and Smriti at a creative workshop

Every Story Bus workshop has helped Siddharth and Smriti grow as individuals and as an organization. In Siddharth's words, "Our journey is measured not by the miles we moved, but the minds we moved." Story Bus will continue to be an ever evolving journey reaching and connecting with diverse lives through meaningful chain-actions and contributing towards the larger vision of humanity, in sync with many changemakers on similar journeys on different routes. Siddharth and Smriti are now involved in setting up a Storytellers Learning Centre – A physical space which is a thriving experimental lab to groom participants towards creating content in the form of animation and books, sharing it with the world and in the process understanding the challenges and solutions of being a creative entrepreneur.

Bringing stories to life

Smriti is a passionate, evolutionary, ardent Theatre of Relevance Practitioner and Initiator, currently writing, conceptualizing, initiating theatre-based modules at individual, institutional, Indian and international levels. She has been thriving as a TOR initiator for the past 12 years with the intent to consistently initiate 'process' oriented workshops where the participants act as the resource. She can be reached at smriti.maskeri@gmail.com / 9819773635.

Siddharth Maskeri is a visionary, storyteller and mentor who is driven to spread happiness and togetherness through his thought-provoking, evolutionary, unifying and humanifying stories. He took a conscious leap from the field of microbiology into the field of storytelling and animation. He made his debut in Indian cinema with his story – Masti Express. After a decade of experience in writing and animation, in 2012, he was sponsored by the French Embassy to visit the acclaimed animation festival Annecy to share his stories with the international market. Enko The Eskimo – a kids' animated series co-created with Emmy Nominated Writer Mike Blum has been under development with a leading broadcaster in the USA. The versatile creator, storyteller and producer is also co-producing an animated series with Toonz Media Group. He can be reached at siddharth.maskeri@gmail.com / 9819289123.

The author, a mother of three, has been involved in the field of education and development for the past 23 years. She has joined the unschooling movement recently. She writes, facilitates and hosts workshops on learning and development and focuses her energies on unschooling herself and her children. She can be reached at sharmilagovande@gmail.com.

📅 April 2019, Profile

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