Can Love Stories Change the World?
by Matt Hopwood

Matt Hopwood approaching Lindisfarne, 500 miles into his journey. Credit: Glynis Long.

Four years ago I set off on a walking journey through England. I was looking for the love stories of the land, meeting with people on the path, in the fields, in the pub, in the villages and towns. Along the way I shared my stories with the people I encountered and they shared theirs with me, creating time and space to explore the notion of love together.

As the work progressed I began to record some of these powerful and compelling stories, creating an online audio collection so that more people could share in the experience. But as I stepped out of my front door on a cold and clear April morning in 2012 I had no idea where the work would lead me, nor how profound the implications might be of connecting love stories to the process of social transformation.

Four years later this project, now titled A Human Love Story, has taken me over 1,500 miles through England, and this year my journey will extend into Europe and beyond. I’ve held sharings in diverse locations from opera houses to prisons, from the calm of a forest path to the busy rhythm of summer festivals, from the rural to the urban. I’ve listened to hundreds of love stories, and the online audio collection has been listened to by more than 25,000 people in over 50 countries in every continent on the globe.

Through these shared experiences of storytelling I have come to the passionate conviction that love stories can change the world, and that sharing loving narratives can be a powerful tool for personal and social change. But how does that happen? And what is a love story anyway?

On my journeys I’ve found that love stories seem to express those moments in our lives when we experience deep connection—as an individual connecting with our interior world, or in connection with others, or with place and with the earth.

Love stories can describe instances, lifetimes, or fleeting moments of connection. They engage with the everyday as well as the highs and lows of our experiences. In a sense, love stories are life stories because they often reflect moments when we feel most alive—when we experience “the fullest expansion of our humanity” in the words of writer and activist Audre Lorde.

Such stories can be powerfully emotive because they express these moments of aliveness, or the shadow side of these experiences—lack of connection, loss of understanding, and loss of compassion. So love stories explore the range of our emotions
and the edges of our experiences: joy, sadness and loss; our sense of home or of being found; pain, anger, bliss, and heart ache.

These deep emotions arise because, in most cases, love stories explore experiences where we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to open out to other people, to ourselves and to our environment. We loosen our barriers, we disarm, and we sensitize ourselves to others and the world.

On my first journey along the South Downs of England, for example, I met with an elderly man on the top of Beacon Hill. We started talking about love and he told me that every day, he and his dog walked the same path in remembrance of his wife who had passed away the previous year. Walking the same route was the only way he could re-awaken her presence with him. The walk was his love story, an epitaph to love and lost love. He expressed the depth of this daily connection, he felt her by his side, in communion with the fields and the sky and their dog, and love continued to unfold through this simple process.

Last year as I walked along a canal towpath through Birmingham a woman in her forties stopped me and asked what I was doing. We walked the path together for a while and she shared her love story with me. Tearfully she spoke of her pain as a mother struggling to let go of her child as he grew older and more independent. He had gone away with friends and she was out of communication with him. This was a love story of letting go.

In 2013 I was fortunate to collaborate with the Pimlico Opera, who worked alongside prisoners to create theatrical productions. I sat down with a group of eight prisoners for a couple of hours and we talked about what love might mean to them, both on the inside and in relation to the outside world. For them love was experienced as a brief moment of connection, an open door, a pat of recognition or a nod.

One man, pointing a finger at his friend, said solemnly that ‘he is my love story’—not in the romantic sense but because he offered kindness, and there was acceptance in their friendship. On leaving I asked them if they would jot their names down on a piece of paper so I could remember them. Each one, without exception, wrote down their prisoner number first: loss of identity, separation—the antithesis of love.

A re-occurring theme on my journeys has been a lack of self love among many of the people I meet—an inability to value themselves, to offer themselves love and kindness. One woman who offered me hospitality for the night told me that she found it almost impossible to look at herself in the mirror, and refused to keep an image of herself on the wall. Her mother had been asking her for a photograph for years, but she had been unable to give her one. She did not consider herself beautiful enough to look at.

Love stories often have their roots in hospitality, in providing welcome to a stranger, an acknowledgement of a shared humanity. In his autobiographical book “Letter to a Hostage,” the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry talks about the miraculous nature of a smile, not only to obscure the trauma of being taken hostage but to remove it all together, as if it never existed. As I have walked from place to place, the willingness of communities to welcome me in, to offer me hospitality and shelter, or just a kind word, has been life affirming.

But how can sharing love stories like these become part of a process of social change?

First of all, sharing your love story takes courage. It requires us to become vulnerable with
others, and asks us to be present in the moment. Through becoming vulnerable we make ourselves visible to others, and this can be challenging—like an unmasking. But through this process we are given time and space to talk and be heard, and to be nurtured. Sharing can create understanding, establish common ground, and build connection. And through compassionate connection we can begin to find the foundations of community.

Secondly, the act of sharing encourages us to express moments when we experience our humanity profoundly, but it also provides an opportunity to create new and evolving narratives of love. For example, the woman in Birmingham who found it hard to look at herself was able to voice her fears and her sense of disconnection, but she also found the courage to take a photo of herself and give it to her mum—a small but not unimportant transformation.

It is these micro-changes that form the basis of transformation on a larger scale, and that’s my third point: the process of building loving narratives can be initiated and scaled up at every level of human interaction—in how we choose to respond to local or global issues, and in every aspect of society where there is division, injustice, fear, and separation; in every place where there is disconnection.

The ability to share openly, to listen and truly hear, provides us with the tools we need to connect with people we may not understand or do not recognize. Through this process the stranger becomes less strange. We see the mother in the refugee, the daughter in the prisoner. In loving narratives there is no ‘I’ or ‘you’, only ‘we’.

Where do these experiences lead us? Much like the powerful resonance that exists in the silence after experiencing a sound, or the ripples that spread across a pond when a stone is cast into water, the reverberations initiated through storytelling support deep healing and connection. The stories are merely vehicles, the first steps on a journey to more conscious and connected communities.

But in the end we must let go of our stories, of words, and move into action, living in the moment and responding to what we see and encounter. We must create new narratives that are not grounded in words, but are rooted in loving presence and connection. And we must be brave. We must engage in defiant acts of personal exploration, of vulnerability and sharing, of listening and understanding. Our activism must start with ourselves just as it extends to others. We must go out on the longest of limbs to practice love in action.