

Story and Leadership Communication

An argument for storytelling in business and beyond

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Introduction

My commercial background includes 12 years communication coaching and media training senior executives including CEOs, etc., across sectors and industries in Australia and overseas.

My academic background is in creative writing.

Today, I might try and bridge the gap. It's worth a shot, because narrative has great wealth and benefit to offer and leader-communicators could use all the help they can get.

One of the challenges seems to be that narrative is neither well represented nor well understood, within significant parts of the business world. It can seem in many ways inappropriate, trivial, abstruse, irrelevant — even unethical.

I will argue, by addressing four questions relevant to story and leadership communication, that story can and ought to be a key component — an apple of gold in settings of silver (Pr.25:11) — in leadership communication.

Narrative covers a rich set of ideas

Put simply, “Narrative is a cover term for a rich set of ideas” (Mateas and Sengers, 1998). We find narratives can be *grand* or *master*, or plain old *stories*. They are representations of connecting events, suggesting and describing relationships, concealing and revealing motivations, expressing and cultivating *Weltanschauung* (Collins Dict., Crouch, etc.).

We could go on: history is story and so are scenario planning, vision and strategy. Whether personal or corporate, past, present or future: life reduces to stories told or about to unfold.

Yet, we raise questions.

1. Is story trivial?¹

Unsurprisingly, when talking about stories, writers hyperbolise: McKee claims stories are “the currency of human contact” (2010, 27) with Dinesen echoing, “To be a person is to have a story to tell” (cited by Simmons, 2006, 1). We expect more circumspection of editors, yet Williams froths, “Storytelling is fundamental to human behaviour. No other form of prose can communicate large amounts of information so quickly and persuasively” (Williams, 1995, 19).

We commonly divide stories into two branches: fictional and what Kearney calls historical (2002). I will go so far as to say, based anecdotally on private discussion, that many professional men in particular seem of the view that fiction is trivial, but that history and biography are not. They sound like those who see, “Craving for story as simple entertainment, an escape from life rather than an exploration of it” (McKee, 2010, 12). Note this red herring’s presumed low value for entertainment, which is worthy of dispute, though not

¹ We could ask the same for any form of trivialised information whether rhetoric or poetic, but such argument offers only tenuous support for in toto discard of the tool based on its use. Note also, that if we were to mount such arguments, we would have to use the very tools we decry, which is self-refuting.

here. It also ignores the fact that story's ubiquity in entertainment *and* in polemics is testament to its usefulness and power.

Ganz demonstrates the use of stories to “recruit,” to “communicate values, like *the way we do things around here*, who our *heroes* are, what our *formative moments* were,” not to mention, “to interpret ourselves and our organization to the world” (Ganz, 2005). He continues elsewhere, that mobilising stories can “develop agency, reformulate identity, and afford access to the motivational resources to form a leadership group, found a new organization, and launch a new social movement” (Ganz, 2001). Hardly trivial.

Psychologists agree: “To the extent that individuals are absorbed into a story or transported into a narrative world, they may show effects of the story on their real-world beliefs” (Green, Brock, 2000). I put to you that stories transport us from a lower to a higher, from a shallower to a deeper, and from a barer to a richer experience of life, so that we can say, story is a form of “life to the full” or “life more abundant” (Jn.10:10). Further, storytelling is a God-like creative act of imagination through which we cultivate culture and manifest the *imago Dei* — *b'tzelem Elohim* (cf. Crouch, 2009).

Further, narrative is an ocean of metaphysics. Writers, critics, theorists and readers have long affirmed narrative's intrinsic link with meaning (Culler, 2011, 83). It helps “make tolerable one's moment between beginning and end” (Kermode, 2000, 4), helping “people to cope” by distraction and by beautifying or neutralizing the world (Sontag, 1965).

My doctoral interest in apocalyptic literature stems from and explores this obsession with identity, origins, values, purposes and ends.

I will slightly rephrase Kearney, who rephrased Socrates, to say, “The *unstoried* life is not worth living” (Kearney, 2002, 14), because that life, and not the story, has become trivial.² As Bruner affirms, “Narrative organises the

² I use *unstoried* in place of Kearney's *un-narrated*, which is in place of Socrates *unquestioned*.

structure of human experience” including “domains of knowledge and skill,” though he admits *how* remains a mystery (1991).

2. Is story attainable by leaders ungifted in so-called finer arts?

Storytelling can seem a high or mystic art. The “great sweep of vision,” the “exquisite delicacy of touch” and the “solicitous passion for detail” of a storyteller like Proust (Wharton, 1997, 117) or Nabokov, not only inspires, but intimidates. *What could I hope to achieve?* we wonder. Add knowledge of an artist’s agony, for example, of Hemingway saying, “It often took me a full morning of work to write a paragraph” and that “an unhappy childhood” was essential to the vocation (Hemingway, 2004, 11, 89) and we soon make excuses along the lines of, “I’m not wired that way.”

But we can be sure the masters were not born that way either. They learned language like the rest of us, along with the techniques and tools of the trade. Gardner asserts, “Trustworthy aesthetic universals do exist, but they exist at such a high level of abstraction as to offer almost no guidance” (Gardner, 1991, 3). Hence the need and provision for basic elements of “a craft, a process, a set of steps” (Clark, 2011, 3). John Le Carré offered one when he said, “*The cat sat on the mat* is not a story. *The cat sat on the dog’s mat* is” (Barber, 1977).

That prolific storyteller Stephen King found when gathering ideas for his book, *On Writing*, that what he wanted to say, “was more to do with instinct than with anything resembling *higher thought*” (King, 2001, 300). You might say, *It’s his instinct that proves he has something I do not*, yet what I think he meant is that not only stories themselves, but the tools we use to make them, can be simple. To get the job done, Hemingway of course added “good and severe discipline” (Hemingway, 7), sitting down each morning to “bite on the old nail” (Phillips, 1984, 47).

As a professional coach, I would say anyone with the mental capacity to lead, and the gumption to speak, with a little practice, can work out and tell an effective story. Yes, experienced yarners add technique and skill to this

mercurial form, but even that may not make their stories any better than yours or mine.

3. Is story applicable in professions, beyond private and domestic life?

Storytelling can be as useful to leadership in business as in any other setting. As artificial intelligence researchers Mateas and Sengers posit, “Narrative is a fundamental organizing unit of human existence” and therefore “it is unsurprising that many different fields have an interest” (1998).

Around the developed world, this ancient art is no fringe cottage industry but mainstream business, under various labels taking in billion-dollar games, movies and novels — and now “corporate narrative,” “content marketing” and “brand story.”³

Fleming even proposes, “The corporate narrative of any organization provides significant insight into its future effectiveness” (Fleming, 2001).

Ligon, Hunter and Mumford (2008) found that regardless of type and orientation, outstanding leaders make sense of their own formative experiences as a “life narrative.” These cognitive-emotional constructs or concise life stories yield the descriptive and prescriptive mental models they use to interpret, communicate and navigate — to make sense of the world — for their followers.

To me, business stories are suited more to the “narrow lens” of memoir and anecdote, than to the “dutiful line” of autobiography (Zinsser, 1998, 15). This is because attentions are short, and narrative tends to discursion. Also suspicion of pecuniary interest is always a limiter.

Frey and Osborne’s study of more than 700 U.S. occupations found nearly 50 per cent of them — many in middle income and service industries — will be at risk of replacement within two decades by robots and computers. The workers likely to out-race the trend will be ones who “acquire creative and

³ The supposedly most expensive advertising slots in the world are during the U.S. football season’s Super Bowl. Big brands pay big money to place 30 second ads during the Super Bowl, often in the form of a mini-movies employing basic storytelling techniques to make a fast emotional connection.

social skills” (Frey, Osborne, 2013). In this scenario, story’s importance moves beyond a source of enjoyment, to a source of employment for *homo sapiens*, or as we might say, for *homo narrators*, given a new appreciation for this primal past time.

4. Given story’s potential emotional and persuasive power, is it ethical?

Aside from postmodern metafiction, practitioners prefer to point attention away from the artifice to aid the spell, and this need not seem nefarious. McKee stresses storytelling is “morally neutral”, even if it “sneaks a message into the fortified citadel of the human mind” (McKee, 2015, 8). Ganz agrees, “Stories are neither true nor false – they either work or they don’t” (2001).

Pluralism, critical literary theory and identity politics have taught us to be suspect of *narrative* in the same way we are of *rhetoric* and *propaganda*.⁴ Nonetheless, though never the final word, stories remain a tremendous way for people to “discover their own evaluative dispositions and appreciate the complexity of ethical response” (Culler, 2001, 121-32).

McKee proposes, that “As Aristotle observed...when storytelling goes bad, the result is decadence” and “When society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out, pseudo-stories, it degenerates.” (McKee, 2010, 13). Connexions between culture and artefact are well-studied, yet the direction of influence is surely in both directions: we craft the story, which then influences us.

⁴ *Rhetoric* remains simply the art of persuasion, and *propaganda* merely the Latin word for propagation. In 1622 when Pope Gregory XV set up his *Congregation for the Propagation* (lit. propaganda) of *the Faith*, the word was not derogatory. The 20th century has given rise to the most destructive narratives in history. Secular communist and socialist narratives are now adduced for the genocides of 60 to 100 million people in the twentieth century. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Black_Book_of_Communism.

The idea that story develops empathy and theory of mind is popular⁵, though it seems an oversimplification. Keen suggests 27 specific “narrative proposals” to improve the research (Keen, 2007).

It is easy to see that the ethics of storytelling turn upon matters of context taking in values embedded, author intention and audience perception. As Crouch handily points out (Crouch, 2009, 95-98), we ought not become accreted to automatic “postures” of “consumption”, “condemnation,” “copying” and “critique,” if we are to keep pace and engage with our stakeholders in culturally relevant ways. Rather, by exercising thinking and imagination, we can rather more flexibly, “gesture” as required. We can then also “cultivate” and “create” in “culture making” acts that in turn “confer legitimacy” on our other gestures.

Conclusion

I conclude referring to a story acting as a metaphor. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan the prophet confronts king David with an allegory, after his transgressions in the matter of Uriah and Bathsheba.

The king’s crimes were **significant**: in his **system** and **culture**, conspiracy, murder and adultery were punishable by death. The situation was **complex**: raising domestic and international complications that could not be undone. The prophet was no critical outsider, akin to a journalist, instead, he confronted the dark side, from onside, as a conscience in the court. The

⁵ Ceridwen Dovey’s “Can Reading Make You Happier?” (*The New Yorker*, June 9, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/can-reading-make-you-happier?> Accessed Jun 12) is one of several recent articles (see also *The New Scientist*) positing that reading literary fiction improves empathy. Keen reminds us for example, that “Authors’ empathy can be devoted to socially undesirable ends,” and “Empathy with characters doesn’t always occur as a result of reading an emotionally evocative fiction,” and “Empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite” (Keen, 2007).

pressure must have been enormous and his **nerves** excited: in exercising his duty, the prophet risked friendship, vocational standing and life itself. The **context** had precedent — earlier prophets had confronted earlier kings —yet for Nathan, the situation was unique, having a **frequency** of one. It was now or never.

So the prophet brought a story about a baby sheep, to the former shepherd boy who now as king, had lately lost his way. **Time** was short, and so was the story, taking little more than 30 seconds to impart. It was **contextually** accessible, relevant and acceptable. It was **socially** competent and **ethically** cogent.

The king was intellectually and emotionally **engaged** and quickly came to boil. When Nathan fired, “You are that man!” David was laid open to his offences and compelled to accept the full force of the judgment that followed.

The overall effect was **transformational**.

I submit that narrative is vital for leader-communicators, because story is quintessentially human and useful. It will not convey all that must be known, asked or stated, but it has a core energy, portability and retention we will do well to harness.

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⁶ Note: A number of Ganz publications are available for reading and downloading at <http://marshallganz.com/publications/>.

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