

## Telling Tales

Imagine you could be this country's unopposed dictator for just a week; you really want to create a better place for all; but you could only make one new law. What would you do? Act on climate change? Asylum seekers? What about Housing? Health Care? Indigenous land-rights? Anti-Racist laws? Raising taxes? Abolishing taxes? Could just a single new piece of legislation influence the way we relate to each other, to the planet, work together and change the world for the better? The answer is surely to be found in education and, if I could, I would pass a single law to change the way we educate our children; I would ban all school subjects.

Except one: Storytelling.

Now many of you will think this is pure hippyshit, but let me assure you the last thing I want to do is create a society of storytellers who can't do basic math, or understand science. I don't want to be lying on an operating table as my surgeon entertains me with humorous tales whilst confessing he has no idea where my sternum is. When I call for a plumber it will be to fix a leaking tap, not for a yarn, at \$150 an hour.

No, my law would make it compulsory to use storytelling to teach subjects. I want maths teachers to teach maths using stories; every school subject: physics, music, art, languages; all taught through the medium of stories. This isn't that revolutionary; remember your favourite schoolteacher, the one who transformed a dry subject into something fascinating and memorable? I'd lay a serious bet that he or she was a great storyteller.

I went on a two-day financial accounting course once; it's the sort of thing you should only do once (I suffer from a rare type of vertigo; if I look at a page of figures I get dizzy), so I was not looking forward to this. But the teacher actually made double-entry book-keeping interesting, fascinating; she created a numerical journey of suspense, twists and false trails, leading to the most satisfying ending, as the bottom right-hand calculations - and here, I swear, she blushed - came to a sensual but balanced zero.

It was like arriving at the final sentence of a great novel. This was better than many nights I had spent in the theatre. On the second morning I found myself actually rushing to the class to find out what was going to happen next and, 25 years on, I remember almost everything I was taught in those two days. I don't know whether the accountancy teacher saw herself as a storyteller but I definitely do. To quote the late, great Terry Pratchett:

“The anthropologists got it wrong when they named our species *Homo sapiens* ('wise man'). In any case it's an arrogant and bigheaded thing to say, wisdom being one of our least evident features. In reality, we are *Pan narrans*, the storytelling chimpanzee.” (The Globe)

There is a guy called David JP Phillips, who trains public speakers in presentational skills and his “Death by Powerpoint” is all over You Tube. Phillips defines three specific hormones that are created in our bodies when we are told stories. Dopamine – brings energy and excitement from, say, a cliff-hanging suspense; Oxytocin – creates empathy; Endorphin – makes people laugh. These hormones increase your receptiveness, compassion and empathy; in other words, you become more open, understanding and ready to learn.

Many years after my accountancy revelations, in those days when notions of climate change were still largely unknown amongst the general public, a group of around 100 scientists and artists formed a loose collective called *Tipping Point*. Every summer there was a two-day gathering in the hallowed halls of Exeter College Oxford, where people with brains visible from outer space would explain complex ideas to writers, musicians, actors, painters etc. Then in the evening we'd all get drunk.

What impressed me most of all was the way these scientists talked to us. Everything was accessible and well within our computatively feeble grasps. We were not being lectured at using a blackboard of algebraic equations, squiggles or data, we were being told stories. I sat transfixed as one scientist described the tragic extinction of a species of South American frog that lived on just one particular coastal mountain at a very narrow and specific altitude, which was permanently at cloud level. This meant that the frog had evolved, over thousands of foggy, froggy years, to take in oxygen via cloud moisture through its skin. It was quite incredible. However, recently, due to the increasing effects of El Niño weather system events, those crucial dense clouds had, over a two-year period, lifted and exposed these frogs to open air, which of course they couldn't deal with. In just two years they were gone, extinct.

When the scientist said this, the room went silent; we were devastated. 25 years have since passed and I still think about it. We were a roomful of artists at the beginning; by the end we had become rampant environmentalists. There were so many things I discovered in that single session, to do with weather patterns, biology, evolution and they were all told through a story – a well-told story.

Ironically, given the narrative skills of these scientists, the reason *Tipping Point* came into existence was that, having banged on for years (in some cases decades) about the need for action, their warnings were failing to have any impact and were ignored by influencers and law-makers. So they came to us: writers, storytellers, musicians; artists of all persuasions. They asked us to listen to what they had to say, digest these facts and narratives and use them in our own works. They felt that we were above all else, communicators and that it was only through stories that the world would understand the real threats we face. One artist would later respond with a site-specific installation about disappearing ice fields, another with a novel that would become a major film, I met a romance novelist who was thinking of including a climate change scenario into her next lurid *corsets & petticoats* tale.

The scientists were right; climate change is becoming *the* major issue that could topple politicians who fail to read the zeitgeist. This is largely to do with the public finally recognising and being captured by, not so much the data or analyses, but the story.

Which of course has to be skilfully told; it has to draw people in from the beginning, keep them enthralled, raising their levels of Dopamine, Oxytocin, Endorphin; opening the channels to empathy, compassion, reception. How else could religions work, convincing and converting population after population, millions and billions; if it wasn't for myths and tales handed down through generations?

For a while I lived in Cambridge - Oxford's lofty sister - as a writer and performer. I got to know a man there; he was homeless and lived on the streets. This was in the early 1970s; he was Nigerian and to be a homeless Nigerian on the streets of perhaps the whitest, most elite-driven city in England, in those days, was quite a challenge.

Though I can recall much about him, I cannot remember his name; but here I shall call him *Olowale*, a Yoruba word meaning 'Wealth has come home'. *Wale* (for he encouraged us all to call him by his shortened name) was always dusty and smelt mildly of sweat and alcohol, which was, strangely, not entirely unpleasant. You might, uncharitably, call him a street mendicant; but he was no mere beggar. In return for payments of sorts, he offered services – highly skilled services; *Wale* told stories.

And in return for these stories, he would expect payment of a coffee, a meal, perhaps a drink or two. And *Wale* never went hungry; he was an expert storyteller; he had to be – his life depended on it.

I never saw *Wale* outside of a local triangle of roads in the centre of town, though I doubt he slept anywhere near there. These were within a few yards of a number of the great Cambridge colleges: Trinity, St Johns, Christ's. The streets thronged with students and for *Wale*, students meant audiences, paying audiences.

Walking along the street, you would have no idea you were his intended audience until an urgent voice half-whispered close to your ear: "My friend! Did I ever tell you that I was once kidnapped by MI5?" Startled, even above the noise of the busy street, you would look up to find yourself staring into his eyes, stained the colour of the cheap red wine you would soon be drinking with him in the pub across the road. If you stopped walking, willingly or not, you were trapped; he had you and you might as well give in to the story.

Once inside the bar, the café, he would set to work. *Wale* was a pro; his craft perfectly pitched. He knew if he let up for one moment he could lose you and once that happened, his lunch, his second glass, had just vanished. So *Wale* had to keep you on tenterhooks, the story climax was always just around the corner; he told you just what you needed to know to want more, to pay for more. The men who were after him, the woman who saved him, the chances he'd lost, the money he'd won. And it was just by the slenderest of good fortunes that we had met here, right now, so he could tell you this most urgent tale but now, he was sorry, with an all too familiar shadow passing by that very window, he must take his leave; thanks for the drink.

One day some spectacularly dandruffed student from Trinity smugly accused me of being gullible, "it's all a pack of lies you know! He's never done any of those things; he just wants your money."

"I know", I replied, looking at the pile of books under his arm and thinking he would never get as much from them as I had from *Wale's* tales, " but it's worth every penny."

If every child were taught the craft of storytelling, what might they have learnt upon leaving school? The list could be endless, but here's a few thoughts:

- How to build an argument
- How to prioritize important ideas
- How to connect with others
- How to sell an idea
- How to recognize that one action has on another and the consequences of a single or a series of actions
- How to make people laugh

- How to encourage empathy in others
- How to recognise patterns of behaviour, before it's too late
- How not to bore people

Of course I could go on but, in the interest of good storytelling, I'll leave it there. It's not a bad list of qualities to take with you into the adult world.

Tell a man a good story and you could make his day; teach him how to tell a good story and he could get a free lunch for life.

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