

The book on stories

By Don Hill

Neuroscientists have discovered that cultural narratives—the stories we tell each other—are more than just stories to the human brain. They help us make sense out of complexity, the blizzard of data that assaults our senses from every which way. Think of it as the software that runs human hardware. That's just how we're built.

In a world that's increasingly defined by uncertainty, instability and risk, stories not only inform, but also *form* our present-day culture. Human beings live inside stories. And human organizations are an outcome of storytelling—for better and for worse.

Stories are also alive, and "require human beings to remain animate," said Robert Bringhurst, the noted literary historian and prize-winning poet who lives on Vancouver Island.

"They are the dominant species on our planet," Bringhurst mused, reflecting on how important stories have endured over time. "We are not in charge here. Our job is to look after stories... to *nourish* them," because stories help us navigate the planet. And if they go missing, he warned, "it means there is no world to speak of."

The stories that guide you, your community or business are like ongoing dramas. There are the tales of epic proportion, like the one's you read about everyday. Other days might feel as if you are living inside a 'soap opera'. Either way, "stories do battle," said Noah Richler, the author of *This is My Country, What's Yours?: A literary atlas of Canada*. "They literally fight for attention."

The soap-opera storytelling model, as a case in point, invites just about everyone into its narrative frame. If you can't see yourself in the scenario, there is usually a character or two you are sure to recognize. Once you buy into the overall premise of the plot, you're hooked. This is an example of what I call a *horizontal* story. Personal dramas all happening at the same time, united in a larger theme or common goal.

THE VISION THING

U.S. President John F. Kennedy offered an open invitation during the early

1960s to participate in the grand adventure of a journey to the moon. It could have been an order from the top to mobilize, a *vertical* story steeped in the authority of the presidential office, what's known as the 'command & control' model of management. Instead, the president asked every citizen in the land, and arguably the world, to contribute their skills, their ambitions and their hearts to

reach for the stars. Write yourself into the script, he might well have said. A million stories later, the moon was in our collective grasp. That's the power of a well-told

And why we need them

horizontal story; it creates the conditions for people to engage in the big picture.

"Thoughtful organizations have restructured their management hierarchy," to a network-based leadership model according to Andre Mamprin, a founding partner of *The Next* consultants in Calgary. There's power in a

well-told story because "networks are catalyzed and motivated by meaning."

"When you tell stories and put them into the network," Mamprin said, speaking from his experience as the former director of *Leadership Development* at the Banff Centre, "it really mobilizes and gathers people together."

Stories are critical because "they are a guiding force to shape the direction of the network."

There's an unspoken caution: Stories don't always have to be correct or even true to be useful.

"There's a sort of naivety about this whole

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storytelling thing," Piers Ibbotson said, underscoring his point with a dramatic sweep of his hand; the gesture is evocative of his role in *The Directing Creativity Programme*, which he developed for The Royal Shakespeare Company in Britain.

"The story, for instance, it's a dog-eat-dog world. It isn't true. Dogs cooperate in packs." And what of "the free market is the only arbiter," Ibbotson continued, or "the story of the revolution and its inevitability—all not true," he said. "Yet these are very powerful stories that dominate our thinking about things."

TRUTH TO TELL

We are at a curious time in human history. There are tremendous resources to tell stories. The actual means—the phones, computers, radio, the gadgets to

put people in touch with each other—are ubiquitous. However, it is increasingly rare to actually hear from leaders *directly*. There are legions of 'communications' spokespersons, a parade of intermediaries who speak on behalf of someone or something. It's rare to hear the word directly from the top.

"Leaders nowadays are managed," Mamprin acknowledged, explaining that it is a function of maintaining shareholder value and "telling the right story, at the right time, to the right people who will buy it." But he wonders "what has that got to do with *corporate social responsibility* and other big words [business] bandies about these days like *authentic leadership*?"

"We live in a world of *interpersonal mush*," said Karen Dawson, an executive coach and leadership development consultant at the Banff Centre. "We're so busy making up stories about what other people are thinking and feeling, we don't have the courage to go face-to-face and check it out."

While it's natural to look out for the boss, today's leaders are over-protected by their communications departments. "I think people are starving for the truth," Dawson said. "People want the truth, even if it's bad news."

Yet there is the temptation to provide simple solutions. To *tell 'em what they want to hear*, not what they need to know. There is a reason for that—the demand for *certainty* in an increasingly uncertain and ambiguous world.

Karen Armstrong, in her best-selling book *The Battle for God*, outlined why nations turn to fundamentalism at a time of

too-rapid change. People will follow a leader no matter what is said, she explained, even jump off cliffs (which actually occurred in Japan during the dying days of the Second World War) as a response to rapid change imposed from outside the culture.

One thing is for certain, a simplistic message—*Ready. Fire! Aim.*—while *affective* in a closed culture where the news is constrained, for instance, tends not to be as *effective* when people have easy access to other information. Leaders caught with weapons of mass distraction risk their credibility in the long term. So what story should you tell when the news is bad?

"Leaders always want to find the right words," Dawson nodded, before reiterating advice her teacher Maya Angelou gave when posed with a similar question: "People will forget what you said," the acclaimed writer once declared, and they "will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." ✓



Maya Angelou

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John F. Kennedy