

Section One

Foundations

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Chapter 1

Why Stories Matter

Anthropologist Dr Frances Harwood – a student of Margaret Mead’s – once asked a Sioux elder why people tell stories. He answered: “In order to become human beings.” She asked, “Aren’t we human beings already?” He smiled. “Not everyone makes it.”

LAURA SIMMS¹

Swimming in a Sea of Stories

The world is full of stories. But not everything is a story; we communicate in other ways as well: we analyze data, exchange information, proffer opinions, make arguments, and plead our case, to name but a few. So, what exactly is a story? My favorite definition comes from organizational storyteller Annette Simmons who says that a story is:

*an imagined (or re-imagined) experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listener’s imagination to experience it as real.*²

A story happens somewhere in the space between the teller’s imagination and the listener’s imagination. “Ah. But I don’t deal in imagination,” you might say. “I deal in facts. I only want to know what’s really happening.” Actually, imagination is how we *create* reality. We rely on our capacity to make images in the mind to interpret immediate sensory information

(sight, sound, touch, smell, taste): we smell baking and imagine the pie; we hear a bang and imagine a gunshot; the hairs on the back of our neck stand up and we imagine an intruder. In this way, imagination is closely related to our basic survival instinct.

But with our highly evolved monkey brains, we humans have learned to combine imagination with language to convey to others things that are not actually happening here and now in front of us. We use our imaginations to “make things up” even when we are doing our best to recall an event accurately and tell it as truthfully as possible. We use our imaginations every time we listen to someone speak and try to make sense of what they are saying.

When we tell (narrate) a story – as Annette Simmons says – we use words and gestures to convey enough detail and feeling to stimulate our own and our listener’s imaginations to create an experience that is real in the mind. Paradoxically, therefore, the essence of storytelling is its tangibility: the storyteller seeks to convey an experience (something that actually happened or might have happened or might yet happen) in such a way that it seems real. It might be a story remembered – and perhaps embroidered – from life; it might be a conscious fiction made up about ourselves or others; it might even go beyond what is humanly possible into the realms of folklore, fairytale, and fantasy. But in whichever of these spheres a story has its center of gravity, something has to happen and it has to happen to somebody (human or otherwise).

Stories necessarily involve particular events happening to particular characters. Narratives that veer toward generalities, explanations, and abstractions, or which insist on telling us their moral or meaning, have abandoned storytelling in favor of propositional knowing and advocacy, and thereby lose their extraordinary ability to stimulate both the feelings and imagination of teller and audience.

Wise leaders know this. Martin Luther King, standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in front of 200,000 civil rights supporters, in Washington on August 28, 1963, probably knew it. His friend, the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who urged him from the crowd “Tell them about the dream, Martin,” certainly knew it. Responding to her encouragement, King broke off from his prepared speech and told the story of a future nation in which there would be racial justice and equality. Over 50 years later

we still remember that story – barely 300 words – though we might be hard put to recall the rest of his 1,600-word speech. It was a story so powerful that even the story of telling the story has become iconic. A short extract reveals its power to move us:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream [that] my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.³

Stories touch us in ways that other forms of communication do not. A good story, well told, can slip past the defenses of the rational mind, pluck at our hearts, and stir our souls. Martin Luther King was an exceptional orator but we too can draw on the power of stories to make (and remake) our worlds.

Stories and storytelling are ubiquitous. There have been human societies and civilizations that have flourished without benefit of the wheel but none has existed without stories. As recent studies in anthropology, philosophy, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience consistently tell us, we are storytelling animals; to be human *is* to tell stories. We are, so to speak, swimming in a sea of stories and as Buddhist scholar David Loy says:

Like the proverbial fish that cannot see the water they swim in, we do not notice the medium we dwell within. Unaware that our stories are stories, we experience them as the world. But we can change the water. When our accounts of the world become different, the world becomes different.⁴

Therein lies the essence of why storytelling matters: to tell a story is not simply to give an account of something but to change our relationship with it; to listen to a story is to allow the possibility of being changed by

it. Stories shape who we are, how we relate to others, and how we make sense of the world. They are so fundamental to how we think, feel, and act that it is not possible to reach our full potential as leaders (or indeed as human beings) without understanding how stories work and using them effectively.

That is a big claim to make. It is the basis on which the whole field of narrative leadership has been developed and the main reason for writing (and perhaps for reading) this book. So let me be absolutely clear; I am asserting that stories are:

1. the primary way we make sense of our experience, giving meaning and significance to our lives and creating (and re-creating) our sense of self;
2. a vital means of building relationships, bringing groups and communities together (discounting others' stories can cause conflict and divisions);
3. a powerful force in the world, acting on our imaginations to shape, extend, and constrain our sense of what is desirable and possible.

Let's look briefly at each of these propositions in turn (we'll explore them in more detail in subsequent chapters) and test their value from your own knowledge and experience.

Imagining ourselves

What kind of story are we in? Is it the story of an adventure, a journey, a voyage of discovery? Or is it something simpler like the story of a child playing by the sea.

JOHN S. DUNNE⁵

1. Ask yourself "Who am I?" or – even better – get someone else to ask "Who are you?" Notice what you say and answer the same question again. And again. And again. When you've had enough, do it again. Keep on going for a few minutes. Notice what you say each time you respond to the question.

If you're anything like me, this will drive you crazy. It's a variation of an old Zen koan that novice monks once spent hours, days, or even weeks contemplating. The point is that behind whatever responses we give lie the constitutive stories of the experiences that lead us to identify ourselves in particular ways. Here for example are a few of my straightforward – factual – responses to the question, each followed by a reference to the kinds of story from which the “facts” arise:

I'm Geoff Mead	. . .	stories of ancestry and naming
I'm a storyteller	. . .	stories of learning about storytelling
I'm a father	. . .	stories of my four (grown-up) children
I'm a divorcee	. . .	stories of love, sadness, and recovery
I'm a British citizen	. . .	stories of history and nationhood

It's virtually impossible to reflect on that apparently simple question (who am I?) without touching the stories of what made us who we are. Our identity – our sense of self – comprises a more or less coherent collection of stories encoding who we think we are and what matters to us. Becoming aware of the storied nature of our being is the first step in developing a more responsible and authoritative relationship with our own histories. We cannot choose our parents or the kind of childhood we experienced, we cannot change what we have done or left undone in our adult lives. But we can learn to recognize how the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences shape the way they influence us; we can give ourselves greater freedom and choice by unhooking ourselves from dysfunctional and limiting stories; we can tap into and draw upon those stories that nourish and sustain us, that enable us to realize more of our potential, to live bigger and more generative lives.

Imagining each other

The shortest distance between two people is a story.

ANON.

An enemy is one whose story we have not heard.

ANON.

Human relationships necessitate the sharing of stories – it is how we come to know (or more accurately, imagine) the other. In healthy relationships there is room for each of us to share our stories: we are curious about and accepting of each other's stories. At first we may be quite selective in what we say about ourselves; we may choose our stories carefully to present ourselves in a particular light. Soon, though, if the relationship is to deepen, we must open up and let ourselves be seen “warts and all.” It is another of the paradoxes of storytelling that we get closer to each other by sharing our differences and thereby discovering what we have in common.

2. Recall a time in your life when you made a new friend or fell in love with someone; remember how hungry you were to find out about each other, how you shared your life stories and were eager to hear theirs. Think about how, as your relationship developed, it became defined by the shared stories of your life together.

This phenomenon is equally true for organizations, groups, and whole societies. As with so many basic human needs, our understanding and way of talking about relationships tend to become abstracted and jargonized in organizations. “Inclusion” and “engagement” are currently fashionable terms (and matters of concern) for organizational leaders trying to make sense of the disenchantment and alienation of co-workers and colleagues – particularly those working at the front line. Organizations spend vast amounts of time and money administering and analyzing staff surveys looking for ways to increase employee loyalty and satisfaction. But unless they are also asking “Whose stories are most valued? Whose stories don't get heard? How can we create opportunities to share and listen to each other's stories?” they are largely wasting their time because few things exclude and disengage people quicker than ignoring or discounting their stories.

We can see how this works by looking at some major social and political divisions in recent history. For example, we have only to think of the

“troubles” in Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century to see what happens when groups within a community (in this case Protestant and Catholic extremists) no longer give credence or legitimacy to the stories of other groups. It was not so much that the stories of each group were disagreed with, it was that they fell completely outside the discourse of the other group: they literally held no meaning or significance for each other. Conversely, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa was – for all its difficulties – a conscious exercise in storytelling across boundaries. Healing divisions requires that we can once again tell our stories to each other and be heard.

Imagining the world

Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.

BEN OKRI⁶

The third and most audacious proposition claims that our perception of the wider world (and hence the ways we think and act) is unconsciously shaped and constrained by the limits of our imagination. The “big stories” are so pervasive that it can be difficult to see them as stories at all; the truth of them may be so widely accepted that just to question them is seen as subversive. Philosopher Michel Foucault called such stories “regimes of truth” because they become institutionalized to the point where, instead of being understood as just one among many constructions of reality, they become the standards by which reality may be judged. Author Philip Shepherd graphically describes how this process occurs:

The story upheld by each culture defines a landscape of behavior and thinking as “normal” and then, like a chameleon, disappears within it. When this happens, the definition is mistaken for the world itself, and passes itself off as the one true reality.⁷

Even so, such stories may be challenged and their dominant influence resisted and overcome. Who now believes that the Earth rather than the

Sun sits at the center of our planetary system? Yet in 1633, the Catholic Inquisition found Galileo Galilei “vehemently suspect of heresy” for circulating his heliocentric astronomical theories, placed his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* on the Index of Forbidden Books (a prohibition that was not lifted until 1835), and sentenced him to life imprisonment. At the time, his views were seen by those in power as dangerously subversive. Why? Perhaps because if his theory – placing humankind on one of several planets orbiting the Sun rather than at the center of the Universe – were to be accepted, it would be more difficult also to believe that all things had been created by God solely for our benefit.

Nearly 400 years after the event, we cannot really know what drove the Catholic Church to react so strongly but we can see how these iconic events undermined a “regime of truth” such that the “big story” of our Universe expanded to allow other imaginative possibilities. It is much harder to see this process at work in contemporary times when we ourselves are so deeply implicated in the stories.

3. Consider some of the “big stories” that have affected the way you perceive the world and how these may be changing in your lifetime. How have these changing stories influenced the way you think and act?

When I considered the “big stories” that have changed or might be changing in my lifetime, some were obvious to me in hindsight while others are still being contested, their futures in doubt. Here – hugely simplified – are a few of the “big stories” that I have encountered.

Limitless Earth: Like so many postcolonial baby-boomers, I was brought up believing that the resources of the Earth were, for all practical purposes, limitless. It was the view of Earth from space taken by the crew of Apollo 17 in December 1972 – a small and inconceivably beautiful blue marble – that revealed the interconnectedness and fragility of our planet and caused me to question for the first time the modernist orthodoxy of unlimited industrial exploitation and economic growth. For me, that iconic

image – Spaceship Earth – created the necessity for a different story of the future. It seems obvious now, but it suddenly became clear to me then that we are all in this together: there is no other spaceship, no other resources to use, and no one to save us if we mess it up.

Right on cue came the 1973 oil crisis when the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) declared a 70% rise in price and an embargo limiting oil exports. Our reliance on cheap oil and other fossil fuels to maintain our standard of living was immediately apparent as prices rose and share markets tumbled; rationing and restrictions on the use of fuel were imposed; currencies inflated and economies stagnated. I was lucky to be able to walk to work and fortunate that my job as a police officer was not threatened by redundancy.

It seemed then that the “big story” of a limitless planet might have changed for good as measures were taken to reduce energy consumption. But it is a seductive story for those of us who are able to sequester more than our fair share of the world’s resources and it was quickly resurrected in the 1980s and 1990s. Instead of finding a sustainable way of living, our energy consumption continued to rise until now the effects of our wastrel lifestyle can be seen in climate change, environmental degradation, and multiple species extinction. Our awareness of the need to change this story has never been greater, though in practice we cling to it like a limpet to a rock as the tide goes out.

Idea of Progress: One of the most powerful and pervasive “big stories” of the past 300 years, born in the Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century, is that the human condition will continuously improve through the application of more effective technology and better social organization (capitalism and communism tell different versions of the same story). But it is dangerous to assume that progress is a one-way track; improvements in both quality of life and material living standards are not inevitable and, in much of the world, in recent decades they have been produced by squandering limited and decreasing supplies of fossil fuels and purchased on a wave of consumer credit that neither individuals nor nations can afford to repay.

Many of us who have enjoyed the fruits of post-World War II prosperity currently see our children and grandchildren struggling to find work, unable to afford decent housing, and accumulating debt to pay for their

education. Some regard this as a temporary disruption to our fortunes, for others it constitutes grounds to reconsider our whole way of life.

The Information Business: What is the first place you would look to find out about the history of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? Wikipedia. In the very recent past, information – even general knowledge – was expensive. Parents went without luxuries to buy a decent encyclopedia for their children to use for homework. A bookshelf groaning with 24 leather-bound volumes from aardvark to zygote was a matter of great pride. From 1768 when the first edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* was published until the advent of the Internet, it was a highly profitable business. In March 2012, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. announced that it would no longer publish a printed edition.

What has changed? It is not just the comparative cost of print and digital media but the whole philosophy of how knowledge is produced. Instead of teams of editors and writers producing exclusive, authoritative articles for our consumption, knowledge can be crowd-sourced and freely shared: anyone can write, challenge, or correct an entry for Wikipedia. Instead of waiting 25 years for a new edition of a printed encyclopedia, online reference material is subject to constant revision and instant free access. Information has become a new commons owned and managed by everyone.

The World Wide Web is reshaping many of our “big stories” about the availability of knowledge and goods. I recently bought a vintage silver brooch from Denmark, bidding online on my iPhone while queuing for ice-cream in a cinema foyer in England. While the auction was in progress, I also checked my emails and looked up the train times for my journey to London the next day. Apart from buying the ice-cream I could not have done any of those things 10 years ago. Now, we expect to have everything everywhere: ubiquity is the watchword for our age.

Unearned Privilege: Another largely unquestioned “big story” in my youth, deriving perhaps from a national history of empire and colonial exploitation, concerned the tacit (and sometimes explicit) assumption of entitlement associated with gender, race, class, and religion: specifically male, white, Anglo-Saxon, middle class, and Protestant. By birth and upbringing, I fell into all these categories, although I soon left behind the one I could change by declaring myself agnostic and then atheist. Throughout my public school education and early working life, everything around

me mirrored back and reinforced the assumed superiority of the archetype that I represented and my sense of entitlement to the privileges I claimed.

It is as uncomfortable for me to describe myself in these terms as it may be for you to read such a description, but this very discomfort is a reflection of the extent to which this story has changed and is still changing. The Britain of which I am a part today is proudly multicultural and multiracial; my sons and daughters were brought up to consider themselves different but equal; in a former career as a senior police officer I did what I could to redress inequality and exclusion on the grounds of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Now I am learning about a different order of systemic privilege that comes from the direct and indirect exploitation of some of the poorest people in the world.

Careers for Life: Lastly, though I could cite other stories, there was the prospect of a secure career for life promised by the post-Great Depression, post-World War II governments of Europe and the United States. In Britain this coincided with the establishment of the welfare state, the National Health Service, and the growth of professionalized public sector organizations such as the police service, which I joined after graduating from university in 1972. This “big story” had a moral dimension: the social contract between state and citizen shifted toward greater mutuality and care. The generation that had fought for its country demanded and was seen to deserve greater social and economic opportunities and protections than hitherto.

As a child of that generation, I was able to take advantage of those opportunities and protections: free university education, wide choice of career, promotion on merit, final salary pension. But this new “big story” has itself been largely overturned for it depended on a level of economic prosperity that we have not been able to sustain. What happens next is a matter for conjecture but politicians of all stripes seem to recognize that the gravy train has run out of steam (and out of gravy).

What “big stories” did you come up with in response to the exercise, I wonder? What stories do you tell yourself about the way the world works? Which stories do you question and which leave unquestioned? These are vital concerns for anyone in a leadership role, for anyone who wants to shape the future as well as make the most of the present. Visionary leaders are both far-seeing and far-shaping: their grasp of imaginative

possibilities is more clearly aligned than most with the unfolding future and therefore enables them to influence it more strongly. They are able, at least to some extent, to change the story.

Changing the story

A story that can't change is as useful as a parachute that can't open.

ANON.

The stories we tell are fateful: our ability to change ourselves, our organizations, and our world depends on our capacity to re-imagine them. In a profound sense, nothing changes unless the stories change. This book is about the stories we tell and the stories we live; the stories that shape us, our organizations and communities, and our worlds. It is about differentiating between those stories that serve our human needs and those that do not; about knowing when to hold on to a story and when to let it go.

Changing our stories is not easy and often the hardest thing is letting go of stories that have served us well enough in the past but have become outmoded and dysfunctional. Even high stakes may not be enough to make us release our grip on such stories – especially when we are unwilling to bear the short-term consequences of facing long-term issues.

In parts of India where people still catch monkeys to eat, they put a morsel of food inside a hollowed-out gourd which is staked to the ground. There is a small hole in the gourd, just large enough for the monkey to reach through and grab the bait inside. The monkey clenches its fist round the food and, overcome by greed, cannot remove its hand. If it refuses to release its prize, the monkey is caught, captured and eaten.⁸

Nevertheless, as leaders, we need to understand how and when to let go of old stories – as well as developing the skills to tell a good, new

story – because, going back to the three propositions that framed this chapter:

1. our sense of identity – who we are – only changes when we change the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves;
2. organizations, groups, and communities only change when the stories, and storytelling dynamics (i.e., the processes by which stories are told and made sense of) between people, change;
3. our view and experience of the world only change as we question the prevailing “big stories” and imagine new possibilities.

The notion of narrative leadership which we will explore in depth in later chapters means taking responsibility for consciously using story to make meaning with and for other people in all of these domains. Often it is about changing the stories that we tell and to which we listen. But storytelling always occurs in a context, so narrative leadership is not about dreaming up some ungrounded fantasy. Nor is the practice of narrative leadership about claiming the exclusive truth of any single story, or about imposing a story on others – those ways lead to fundamentalism and oppression.

This is an important reminder that stories can be used for malign as well benign purposes (Hitler was a practiced and skillful storyteller) and their very power demands that we pay careful attention to what stories we have earned the right to tell, our intentions in telling them, and how we tell them. Narrative leadership is the antithesis of spin-doctoring: it demands courage, integrity, and authenticity.

Bonus: *Life of Pi*

At the end of each chapter, I'll give you a bonus: a movie or a story that illustrates one of its main themes. You won't have to watch or read them to make sense of the chapter but they will offer another perspective and a different way of engaging with the material. I've chosen the 2012 movie *Life of Pi* for this chapter; it's a film (and Booker Prize-winning novel) about why

stories matter. The protagonist Pi Patel tells the story of how he survived for 227 days adrift in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger for company. His story is disbelieved by representatives of the company investigating the shipwreck and he tells another equally dramatic but more believable version. The film puts me in mind of Joan Didion's famous remark that:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live . . . We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely . . . by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.⁹

In an interview on the DVD, the author Yann Martell shares his view that a life made up of bare facts is meaningless and that it is the stories we weave around the events of our lives that make them meaningful. *Life of Pi* invites us to think about how we choose the stories that give our lives meaning. It is readily available on DVD and well worth watching.

Summary

- We use our imagination to create and understand our reality. Storytelling uses voice, words, and gestures to convey enough detail and feeling to stimulate the imagination to create an experience that is real in the mind.
- Stories are always about particular events happening to particular characters (human or non-human) in a certain time and place. They may be about the past, present, or future; they can be based on fact, fiction, or fantasy.
- Stories and storytelling are everywhere: story is our primary way of making sense of our experience, giving meaning and significance to our lives. To be human is to tell stories – we are the storytelling animal.
- We create (and re-create) our sense of self through the stories we tell ourselves; groups and communities are built upon the stories they

share; our view of the world and what is possible and desirable are shaped by the “big stories” of our times.

- Nothing changes unless the story changes because our inner world of feeling and imagination governs how we think and act. Changing our stories requires that we learn to let go of old stories as well as telling new ones.
- Narrative leadership recognizes the importance of storytelling and consciously uses stories to make meaning with and for other people. It is an essential leadership practice which demands courage, integrity, and authenticity as well as skill.

Notes and References

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- 4 Loy, D.R. (2010). *The World is Made of Stories* (Wisdom Publications: Boston, MA, p5).
- 5 Dunne, J.S. (1975). *Time and Myth: A Meditation on Storytelling as an Exploration of Life and Death* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN, p1).
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- 9 Didion, J. (1979). *The White Album* (Simon & Schuster: New York).

