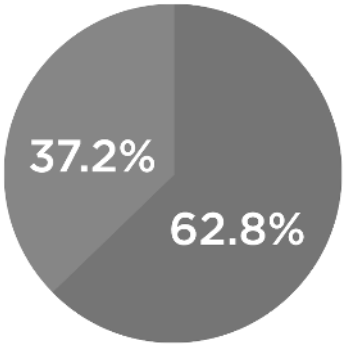
1 The Power of Story

Pretend that the world decided to elect a queen. The candidates have been whittled down to two well-known British women: Queen Elizabeth and J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series.

You have been asked to vote in this election based on who you trust more. Who would you vote for, and why?

A couple of years ago we were curious about this, so we took the geeky route and asked 3,000 Americans this question.

The results of our election might surprise you.



Rowling, the children's book author, beat Elizabeth, the monarch, by what pollsters call a landslide.

But why?

Why would we be more likely to trust the author over the queen? Why would we choose the storyteller over the woman with a lifetime of leadership experience? And what does this have to do with the business world?

In this book, we're going to answer those questions. First, we'll dig into the science of story and what stories do to our brains. Then we'll get into how we can become powerful storytellers ourselves and how to use storytelling as a strategy to persuade and present more effectively at work, grow our businesses, and make a difference in the world.

And, as you might have guessed, we're going to start with a couple of stories.

Jacques and the Beggar

Many years ago, a French poet named Jacques Prévert was walking down the street. He passed a beggar asking for money. For whatever reason, Jacques decided to stop and talk to the man.

"How's it going?" Jacques asked.

As the beggar turned, Jacques noticed that he was blind. In fact, he had a sign that said so.

The beggar replied, "It's not going very well. People walk by and they don't leave any money in my hat. Would you give me some money?"

"I'm a poor writer," Jacques said. "I have no money. But perhaps I could rewrite your sign for you?"

"By all means," said the beggar. He had nothing to lose.

So Jacques took the sign, flipped it over, and wrote a new message. And then he went about his day.

A few days later, Jacques was walking along the same path, came across the same beggar, and decided to ask the same question.

"How's it going?"

This time the beggar's tune had changed.

"People have been so generous lately," he said. "My hat fills up three times a day. Thank you, thank you for what you wrote on my sign."

Here's what Jacques had written:

"Spring is coming, but I won't see it."

With one sentence, Jacques transformed a statement into a story. In a single line, he changed a man's life.

Now—keep that story in the back of your mind while we tell you one of Shane's favorite stories in the world:

And Now for Shane's Favorite Ryan Gosling Story

Ryan Gosling is an actor. He's pretty.

For a long time, Shane didn't care about him at all.

Sure, he seemed like a good actor. But Shane never saw *The Notebook*, which the whole world adored. He knew there was a bizarre amount of Internet meme activity around Gosling. But, you know, whatever. He was okay.

Then one day, Shane was sitting in the audience of a business conference. Some guy was giving a terribly dull presentation—one of those talks where there are about 250 words of tiny text crammed onto every single slide. Shane ran out of emails to answer, so he began browsing Wikipedia. We don't quite know how, but at some point, he ended up on the entry for Ryan Gosling. And for whatever reason, he decided to go ahead and read it.

Don't judge. As we said, the presentation was really boring.

Here's the gist of Ryan's story, according to the editors at Wikipedia:

Gosling had a bit of a sad childhood. He grew up in Canada. (That was not the sad part!) His dad was a traveling salesman, so his family moved a lot. When he was young, his parents split up. He ended up living with his mom, who worked full time. All the moving and family trouble affected him. He had a hard time making friends. He didn't learn to read until far later than most kids—nearly into his teens. He was diagnosed with ADHD.

Watching television became Gosling's favorite hobby. He loved movies and accents. He loved *The Mickey Mouse Club*. He loved Marlon Brando.

But he was bullied at school. Moving around and watching a lot of TV probably didn't help him make friends.

Things came to a head one day at school when he brought knives to primary school and threw them at the kids who bullied him. He'd decided to take matters into his own hands like his action film hero Rambo.

Around age 12, Gosling begged his mom to let him go to an audition for *The Mickey Mouse Club* in Montreal. He was a cute, talented kid, and he got the part.

Now here's the crazy part of the story: Because his mother couldn't move to Orlando with him, Gosling got adopted by none other than Justin Timberlake's mom. (Or rather, she became his legal guardian.)

He learned how to perform on *The Mickey Mouse Club*. He learned to read well. He learned to focus. He grew up.

. . . and he became Ryan Gosling.

And then something strange happened.

After reading this Wikipedia entry, Shane suddenly wanted to watch some Ryan Gosling movies. So he went and watched *The Notebook*. (Turns out it's fantastic!) The next time a Gosling movie was in the theater, Shane watched it. He started telling people about how cool Ryan Gosling was. How human he was. It wasn't long before people started introducing him as, "This is Shane—he founded Contently, and he's a HUGE Ryan Gosling fan."

And it was true! Ten minutes on Wikipedia had turned him from apathetic to advocate. He's on Team Gosling, and he's on it simply because he learned his story.

As weird as it sounds, Shane feels like he has a relationship with Ryan.

We learn a couple of things from these two stories. First: Stories are powerful. Both Jacques's experience with the blind man and Shane's with Ryan Gosling show this. They illustrate what great stories fundamentally do: They build relationships, and they make people care.

People didn't care much about the blind man when he asked for money. But when he helped people understand what it was like to be in his shoes—when he shared his story—they were moved to help him.

Shane didn't care about Ryan Gosling. Now he refers to him by his first name. If they ever meet, he's going to give Ryan a hug. But we bet Ryan's used to that sort of thing by now.

This power of stories to change our minds, to build relationships and make people care, is more than just neat. It's scientific.

A few years ago, a group of researchers from University of Pennsylvania gave $5 to random people and asked them to read different letters from charities asking for money. When the plea for donations relied on statistics and talked about widespread problems, people donated less. When the request involved a story of an individual in pain, people donated more.

Versions of this experiment have been repeated dozens of times using television commercials, brochures, and in-person persuasion. The result is always the same. A plea for help will get some donations. But a story always gets more.

That's because . . .

Our Brains Are Built for Story

In the classic tale *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* by Nathaniel Philbrick, a group of sailors were "zagging" off the coast of South America in 1821 when they came across something ghastly. They were in a whaling ship named the *Dauphin*, under the command of a captain named Zimri Coffin. One day on the horizon a small boat popped into view in the middle of the ocean. Here's an account of what the Dauphin crew saw:

> Under Coffin's watchful eye, the helmsman brought the ship as close as possible to the derelict craft. Even though their momentum quickly swept them past it, the brief

> seconds during which the ship loomed over the open boat presented a sight that would stay with the crew the rest of their lives . . .
>
> First they saw bone—human bones—littering the thwarts and floorboards, as if the whaleboat were the seagoing lair of a ferocious man-eating beast.
>
> Then they saw the two men.
>
> They were curled up in opposite ends of the boat, their skin covered with sores, their eyes bulging from the hollows of their skulls, their beards caked with salt and blood. They were sucking the marrow from the bones of their dead shipmates.[1]

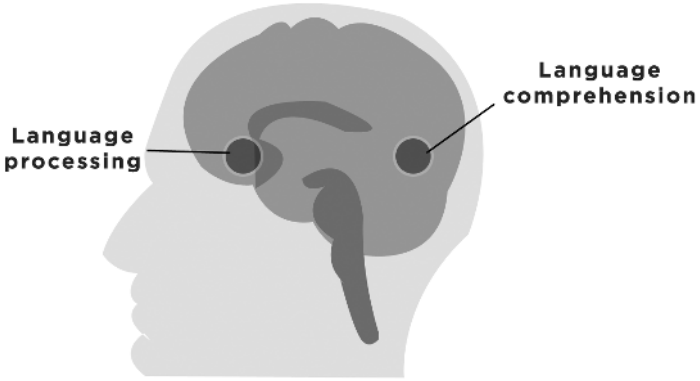
Quick! Think about where you were when you just read that. Do you recall how the seat you were sitting in felt as you pictured the salt-caked beards of the cannibal shipmates? Did someone in the room with you happen to cough while you read this? Do you recall any background noises outside? Any trucks or sirens?

By the time you finished reading that passage, chances are your brain had pulled you into the story. Your imagination filled in the scene, and your present circumstances faded into the background of your consciousness. This is what Jonathan Gottschall, who shares this anecdote in his wonderful book *The Storytelling Animal*, calls "the witchery of story." It's what our brains have been biologically programmed to do.

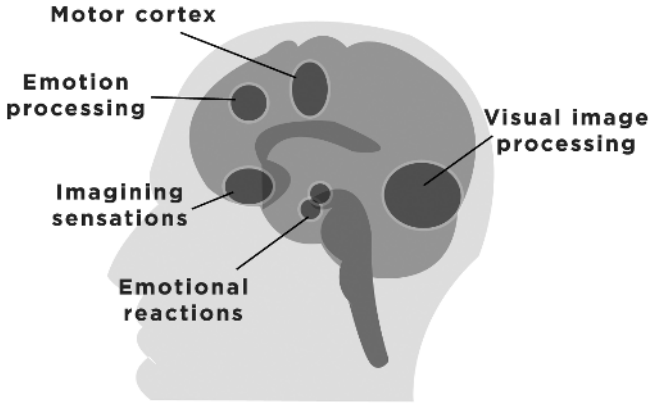
We are hardwired to dramatize, to imagine, and to be pulled into good stories. Think about the last time you watched a movie or read a book and were suddenly snapped back to reality by a noise in the room. You hadn't realized that you'd lost awareness of your surroundings. You didn't notice

when the line between reality and the story world inside your brain began to fade. That process—which we go through every night while we sleep—is a survival mechanism that helps us do a better job of storing information in our memory.

Stories Help Us Remember



We also know the areas of your brain that light up when you hear or see a story:



It turns out that something surprising happens when information comes via a story than via simple facts: More of our brains light up. When we hear a story, the neural activity increases fivefold, like a switchboard has suddenly illuminated the city of our mind.

Scientists have a saying: "Neurons that fire together, wire together." When more of your brain is at work at a given point of time, the chances that your brain will remember the work it did increases exponentially.

Pretend, for example, you are in high school health class, and your teacher is giving a slideshow presentation. The first slide features a chart filled with stats on how many people die or are ruined every year from drug use. The teacher says, "Drugs are dangerous."

In this moment, the areas of your brain responsible for language processing and comprehension will be working to absorb this information.

Now say that instead you have a substitute teacher who takes a different approach. She puts up a slide with a photograph of a handsome teenager. "This is Johnny," she says. "He was a good kid, but he had a lot of family problems that made it hard to be happy some days. He was quiet and got picked on a lot. So he started hanging out with some of the other picked-on kids. One day, one of them offered him drugs. He started doing lots of drugs to make himself feel better. Ten years later, he looked like this—" cut to a photograph of a sickly looking mid-20 s young man with missing teeth. And then, the teacher gives the same message as the first: "Drugs are dangerous."

During this lecture, all sorts of areas of your brain will be active. Areas that help you imagine what Johnny's life is

like. How he feels. How you might feel some of the same things.

Unsurprisingly, the second kind of presentation—the story—is a lot more memorable. Students who see that presentation are going to be more likely to think about Johnny next time someone offers them drugs. No matter what choice they make, they are more likely to remember the message that drugs are dangerous.

Do you see where we're going? When we get information through stories, we engage more neurons. As a result, the story is wired into our memory much more reliably.

Imagine how this could change your next presentation.

Stories Generate Empathy—at the Chemical Level

A few years ago, scientists packed a bunch of people into a movie theater to see exactly how stories work on our brains. They put helmets on the participants' heads, strapped on monitors to measure their heart rate and breathing, and taped perspiration trackers onto their bodies. The participants looked around nervously, laughed as they made small talk, and fiddled with their helmet straps.

And then a James Bond movie began.

As the movie played, the scientists closely monitored the audience's physiological reaction. When James Bond found himself in stressful situations—like hanging from a cliff or fighting a bad guy—the audience's pulses raced. They sweated. Their attention focused.

And something else interesting happened: At the same time, their brains synthesized a neurochemical called oxytocin.

Oxytocin is our empathy drug. It sends us a signal that we should care about someone. In prehistoric times, this was useful for figuring out if a person that was approaching you was safe. Were they a friend, or were they going to club you on the head and steal your woolly mammoth steak? Through oxytocin, our brains helped us identify tribe members whom we should help survive. Because that would help us survive, too.

Our heart rates rise when James Bond is in danger because our brains have decided that he—this familiar character—is part of our tribe. We generate oxytocin when we see him, which makes us empathize with his story when we watch it. And, circularly, the more of his story we experience, the more oxytocin our brain secretes.

That means that we're not just watching James Bond. We're putting ourselves in his shoes. At the deepest physiological level, it means that we really care.

Oxytocin levels can actually predict how much empathy people will have for someone else.

And—fun fact!—there's actually now such a thing as synthetic oxytocin. You can shoot it into your nose like Flonase. One of the first thing scientists did with this, of course, was make people snort oxytocin and then ask them to give money to charity.

Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that, compared to regular people, oxytocin snorters were more charitable. (Maybe some drugs aren't so bad!)

Stories Bring Us Together

It's hard to learn someone's story and not feel connected to them. The oxytocin we get from stories helps us care, whether we like it or not.

This is basically the premise of the film *The Breakfast Club*. A group of misfits is forced to come together for detention one Saturday. After sitting miserably for a while—hating each other—they start to share stories about their personal lives, their parents, and, of course, their dreams. Over the course of the movie, they form a bond. When they leave detention and go back to their different worlds, they remain closer than before. They aren't necessarily going to be best friends, but they now understand and respect one another. You can imagine them standing up for one another against a bully or becoming close friends after high school, when the artificial boundaries of their cliques start to disintegrate.

But even more interesting, we don't even need to share our own stories to build a relationship with someone. Sharing almost any story makes a difference. In a 2011 research study in New Zealand published in the *Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education*, researchers put kids from different racial and economic backgrounds together for a series of storytime activities. The scientists found that even when the kids weren't sharing their own stories—when they were simply reading storybooks—they developed empathy for one another. They felt more connected. And as they grew up, they were less racist and classist than other kids.

Storytelling, the researchers concluded, "fostered empathy, compassion, tolerance and respect for difference."[2]

This is why it makes sense that people still go on dates to the movies. On the surface, a movie is a terrible date. Both people experience the movie separately. It's a parallel activity that doesn't involve interacting with your date at all. And yet, it becomes a shared experience. Because your brain is wired to remember experiencing the movie's story more deeply and vividly than other experiences, that story becomes subconsciously more meaningful to you—even if the movie was bad. And the fact that you and your date experienced the same story together actually brings you closer.

This is another way storytelling played a part in how we survived as a human species. When we were first building civilization, we grouped up in tribes. We had this magnificent brain, but we had to protect it against saber-toothed tigers and poisonous berries and thousands of other things that could kill us at any moment. We had to work together to survive. We had to hunt together, gather food together, make shelter together, and pass on lessons that we learned so that our descendants would survive, too.

But how could we do that, when we didn't have a written language to record what we'd learned, how we'd survived? The answer, of course, was stories.

Evolutionary biologists say that the human brain developed the ability to tell stories—to imagine them and to dream them—around the same time as our ability to speak. Storytelling was an essential piece of the development and endurance of language.

And so we would gather as tribes at the end of our workday. We would take the wide world of stimuli from our time hunting and gathering and building. And we

would package it all into stories—the stories that helped us remember and care.

Think for a minute about something you're particularly loyal to. Like your family, your country, or your favorite sports team. Our loyalty is often somewhat irrational. Our families may not always be that nice to be around. Our countries might not actually be giving us everything we need. Our favorite sports team might be the New York Jets.

Why might you love, say, a grandparent who lives so far away that you never see them? Or an uncle whose social and political views directly oppose yours? Aside from the fact that they probably love you, too, you've probably spent a lot of time at the dinner table or on the porch hearing interesting stories about them. Those stories strengthened your relationship, despite distance or differences.

Why do Americans love their country so much? At the time of this writing, the education and health systems are more expensive and rank lower than most developed countries. Job security is low; income inequality is high. We have more people in prison than any country in the world (and more per capita than every country except Seychelles, which, it turns out, has a big pirate problem). There's a lot of amazing things about the U. S. of A., but there's a lot that needs to be better, too. And yet Americans constantly talk about how it's "the greatest country in the world."

That's because we grow up hearing badass stories about the place. The story of America is truly a Hollywood tale, an underdog story about a cast of misfits who won an improbable battle for freedom against the most powerful empire on Earth. Those stories have left heroic images seared into our minds:

The Boston Tea Party sparking a thunderous display of defiance. The Founding Fathers urging on a revolutionary army with rags for boots. Washington sneaking across the icy Delaware River to launch a surprise attack that turned the tide of the war. Stories about Tesla, Einstein, and all the great inventors and innovators and pioneers who immigrated to America and made a difference.

Why might you love the Jets when they constantly let you down? Maybe you grew up hearing stories about them, too. (Joe Namath and his fur coat FTW!) Or you associate watching the drama of a Jets game—which unfolds as a story itself—with your parents, siblings, or college roommates. You've formed a bond through those stories—a bond that resists rationale. Whether that story is of the Butt Fumble or an improbable upset of the Patriots in the playoffs, it forms a bond that's incredibly difficult to break.

Those stories—and that bond—help you endure the tough times, so you can move forward together with your team or country (or whoever!) and not just abandon ship at the first sign of trouble. This is how humans have overcome obstacles together since we were living around campfires.

Research shows that families that spend dinnertime together end up having stronger relationships. That's in large part because of what we do at family dinner: We tell stories. We ask each other what happened. We reenact the comedies and the dramas of our day. And through sharing those stories, we build relationships of trust and care.

This is how religions impart messages, too. It's how, through stories, we remember the parables, the life lessons, the things that we need to do to be better people and take

care of others. Stories are the bridge that connects our disparate lives.

Every great movement in history has used stories to inspire humans to come together around a cause. When we marched on Washington, DC, in 1963, thousands of people from different backgrounds linked arms because of the stories of Rosa Parks and others, stories that changed the way folks thought about civil rights—or made them care enough to fight for them.

When you look at the history of business, it should be no surprise that the kinds of companies that build the most loyalty are the ones for which storytelling is their business. They're the newspapers, magazines, movie studios, and television production companies that educate and entertain us every day with stories. They're so successful at getting and keeping people's attention through stories that brands pay them millions of dollars to advertise next to those stories.

These media companies teach us a lesson that all great businesses tomorrow need to know: If you want people to buy your product, you have to get them to care about your story.

In the late 2000s, for example, Ford Motor Company found itself in trouble when its cars were started to get a reputation as low quality. Foreign cars seemed to be getting better and better. Meanwhile, Fords were breaking down, people were disappointed, and sales were falling.

So Ford used stories to get people to care again. They took documentary film crews into the Ford factories and interviewed employees working on the assembly lines and designing the next generation of vehicles.

And they said to the cameras: We know that we have screwed up. We know that Ford isn't what it used to be, but we are all working hard to turn things around and to make our cars awesome again. So we're going to show you the stories of the people who are your neighbors, who are working on these cars, who are working to make this product once more the product that you know and love.

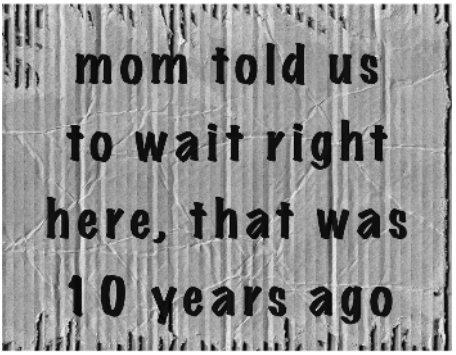
These stories helped Ford to clear the air with customers and get people to pay attention to them and their plans for the future. The series became a terrific early step in Ford's long journey to turning things around.

With Great Power . . .

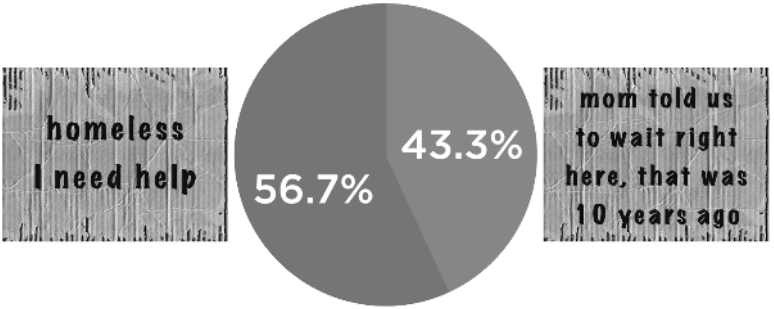
As you can see, we're a little obsessed. Stories have done a lot of good throughout history. They've helped us survive. They've helped us build relationships and societies. They've helped us create movements and businesses. They're an essential part of what makes us human.

One day a few years ago we decided to conduct a study to replicate the effects of the Jacques Prévert and the beggar story. We found two homeless signs on Google Images and asked 3,000 people which one they would donate to if they had $1 to give. One sign was a sales pitch, a plea for help. The other sign was a story.

Of course, our hypothesis was that the story sign would make the most money. The question was just how much more effective would the sign be.



The results of the poll, however, caught us by surprise.



The sign that told a story didn't win.

But then we dug a little deeper. We had asked each survey respondent to explain why they picked their answer. Most of the people who picked Sign #1 did so for a telling reason.

They said they didn't pick Sign #1 because it was a better sign. They picked it because they didn't think Sign #2 was true.

Which, of course, it can't be. Nobody would wait for 10 years on a street corner for their mom. It's a sad sign, but it's also obviously a put-on. (In fact, many who voted for the story sign said they did so because they thought it was funny, not because they thought it was true!)

This illustrates an essential point. Whereas we humans are built for story, we're also built to discern. We look for things that are wrong. And despite all the power that stories have for good, a story that deceives people is likely to backfire.

We've talked a lot about how stories are used for good. But stories have been used in history for evil as well. Dictators throughout history have used stories to inspire fear and mistrust—to create loyalty through division and to make people believe in wrong and hateful ideas.

The good news is that, at the end of the day, if you're using stories for evil, the truth will come out. Eventually, citizens rebel. Those stories start to lose their credibility, and good people turn around to fight the deceivers.

As people and companies in the twenty-first century, we can't afford to be dishonest storytellers. We need to recognize that when we're using stories to build relationships, we can't lie. For stories to make a powerful and lasting impact, they have to be congruent. You can't post YouTube videos about

protecting the environment while you're dumping sewage into the river out back.

That's not to say that we can't build relationships through fictional stories. People voted for J. K. Rowling in our Queen of the World poll even though her stories are make believe. That's okay, because we knew what we were getting when we picked up those Harry Potter books. Rowling's contract with us was that she would tell us an incredible, fictional story about a school of wizards. She fulfilled that. She was congruent.

Which brings us back to the question that opened this chapter. Why would we trust the storyteller over the monarch? Why did we vote J.K. over Queen Elizabeth? In our poll's comments, people by and large said, "I feel like I know her."

And, indeed, we did get to know her. Over seven books and thousands of pages, we learned what she cares about, how she thinks, and whom she loves. We had empathy for her characters, who reminded us of people we care about in our own lives. And in the background, our brains were at work, firing and wiring and oxytocin-*ing* like crazy.

Now that we understand why stories work, for the rest of this book, we're going to talk about how to make them work. Because what good is a story if you don't know how to tell it?