

Chapter 1

Once Upon A Time

Winter 2006. Early in the new year. The days short, grey and bitterly cold. And I was besotted. The first few months of my first son's life were a staggering love story. I couldn't get enough of his beautiful face, which changed every day and yet was constantly, uniquely and brilliantly him. Everything he did was fascinating. I would spend hours marvelling at all the potential condensed into his intense little body, and imagining a thousand bright futures for him. It was the most immense privilege to have played my part in his coming into the world, and I was both humbled and energised – I felt I could leap mountains for him.

The first few months of my first son's life were also a bracing roller coaster ride. Who was this demanding, noisy and irrational stranger? What had happened to my previously friendly body? Everything hurt or leaked. The house was a shambles and I was late for everything. None of the books talked about this. What was I doing wrong? There was also the teeth-grinding tedium of the routine. Eat, poo, sleep, repeat. My conversation shrivelled to repeating anecdotes from Radio 4's Women's Hour. My husband, family and friends were mysteriously replaced by irritating idiots.

Every day I would look at the clock convinced the day must be nearly over only to find it was barely lunchtime. I was sure a baby had felt like a good idea a year previously, but could not for the life of me remember why. I was very, very tired. I took a lot of baths and drank a lot of wine.

Why am I telling you this story? To make you smile. To paint a picture. To elicit empathy. To welcome you. To ignite your curiosity. To make you want to stay and read on.

Also, to set up a memorable metaphor . . .

Early summer 2017. The days warming, lengthening and loosening. And I was besotted. The first few months of our newly merged firm's life were a staggering love story . . .

There are lots of fun parallels between life in the eye of a major organisational change project and life in the eye of the ultimate life-change project that is the arrival of a baby, and we all love a good story. Staying up too late watching a box set (*just one more . . .*), reading by torchlight under the covers when our parents have switched the light off . . . we are echoing our ancestors around the campfire – listening, imagining, falling in love, slaying dragons, scaring ourselves silly, hanging off cliffs.

We are twenty-two times more likely to remember a story than a set of facts.

For a long time, psychologists thought that our proclivity for storytelling may be no more than what Steven Pinker¹ calls evolutionary 'cheesecake' – a fun, but ultimately useless, titillation for the restless machine that is our cognition. But a brilliant new study on hunter-gatherer societies proposes² that telling stories may in fact be an important mechanism by which knowledge is shared – the sort of 'who knows what about what' type of meta-knowledge that society needs us to have in order to function.

Stories are about the 'rules of the game' and the consequences of breaking them, just as gods with thunderbolts are for those of a more religious bent. And in much the same way, they help to promote cooperation and to encourage groups to bond. These findings chime with the theory of journalist and author Christopher Booker, who argues in *The Seven Basic Plots*³ that we tell stories in order to pass a model for life down the generations.⁴

The central tenet of this book is that organisations need stories during periods of profound change. When things are volatile, or uncertain, or

otherwise changing – *pretty much all the time, then!* – people need to make sense of the world around them. Groups of people need something to hold them together and help them move forward in a loosely coordinated way. Visions and strategy statements lose their power a little when volatility, uncertainty, conflict and ambiguity make it hard to discern the path ahead. Stories are less linear and can function at a different level. They can clarify and galvanise even when the times are uncertain and scary.

Not any old story will do, though. Not all stories are created equal. The best stories – the ones that give you goosebumps, or make you cry, or prompt you to go home and sell everything you have and pack a bag – those are the stories that speak straight to the heart of what it means to be us: who we are, why we're here, what matters, why we do what we do and how we do it. In other words, stories about our purpose and values.

So, the central tenet of this book, really, is that businesses need a purpose. And shared values. And stories – for the business as a whole, and for every business unit, team, office and human being within it – that speak into that purpose and those values and bring them to life; all shadows dancing around the same campfire of one single, bright common purpose. Those organisations – and their leaders – who are clear about why they are here and doing what they're doing . . . those businesses and leaders who can craft and tell stories that communicate those things well, individually and corporately . . . those are the businesses and leaders who are better able to drive long-term value by tackling the big challenges and grabbing hold of the big opportunities that periods of profound change present.

Defining Terms

In this book we are going to talk a lot about stories, culture, values and purpose. They are all connected ideas, but distinct. Each concept is

unpacked in more detail a little later, but here, for now, is an attempt at a working definition of each of the various terms:

- **Purpose** – this is what an organisation is here to do. Why are these particular people, with these particular skills, experiences, relationships and assets, configured together into some sort of organisation? If an organisation vanished tomorrow, what would be missing in the world? This is purpose. Purpose is an organisation's North Star.
- **Values** – these are the guiding principles of an organisation. As the guys at Netflix say, 'Values are what we value.' They may be spoken or unspoken, but they are the non-negotiable things – the bright lines.
- **Stories** – these are a primary means by which purpose and values are articulated and explained, usually with some other things – strategy, successes, common experiences, artefacts – thrown in. They also, in turn inform purpose and values.
- **Culture** – this is the whole lot, and everything else. It is the air an organisation breathes; the soil it grows in. Culture is shaped by purpose and values, and by stories – but also by strategy, systems, history, the times we live in, where we are physically located, and the people leading us.

Notes

1. Pinker, Steven. *How the Mind Works*, Penguin, 1999.
2. Smith, Schlaepfer, Major, Dyble, Page, Thompson, Salali, Mace, Astete, Chaudhary, Ngales, Vinicuis & Migliano. 'Cooperation and the Evolution of Hunter-Gatherer Storytelling' *Nature Communications* 8: 1853, 5 December 2017.
3. Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we Tell Stories*, Continuum, 2005.
4. Wait, what? Seven basic plots? Yes. The central tenet of Booker's book is that the vast majority of all of our stories follow one of seven basic structures: overcoming a monster (Beowulf) . . . rags to riches (Cinderella) . . . the quest

(The Odyssey) . . . voyage and return (Watership Down) . . . comedy (Twelfth Night) . . . tragedy (Anna Karenina) . . . and rebirth (A Christmas Carol). It's a delicious and distracting theory. And while you are running through the flip book of your life story so far, trying to work out which best fits, we can get even more reductionist. A quote variously attributed to John Gardner and Leo Tolstoy says that in fact there are only two stories in the world – 'a man goes on a journey', and 'a stranger comes to town'. And even then, the difference between these two stories is only really a matter of perspective . . .