

WHEN IS A STORY NOT A STORY?

1500 words

April 2004

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Many society members, if they listen to Radio 4 discussion programmes or move in educational circles, will have noticed how often the word story now crops up referring to underlying belief systems or ways of understanding the world. The discussion on the 17th November edition of Start The Week, which ranged over “National Myth”, “the fundamental hunger for story” and its place in neurological and cognitive science, was characteristic. On 4th February (Thinking Aloud) we even had researcher Jeremy Meyerson describing how office designs and layout are meant “to tell a story”. I have in front of me several new psychotherapy books in which the word figures centrally, indicating the way in which an individual gains understanding of the events of their life. It is particularly recurrent in studies of organisational and corporate culture, exploring how shared assumptions are circulated and how they can be altered. Does this have a real connection with story as meant by those of us active in the telling of the old tales for their own sake?

In his book The Springboard¹ (“How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge – Era Organisations”), Stephen Denning, a “director of knowledge management”, describes his presentation to the National Storytelling Association in the U.S.A. Afterwards he asks one of the professional storytellers, “a colourful character with a folksy manner”, what he thinks of the story, and is told that the listener simply did not recognise what he heard as a story, “there was no plot.... no celebration..... no building up of the characters...” and so on. The author takes issue with this. For him story could be the narration of an incident from corporate history, which makes a point and therefore alters the attitude and behaviour of employees. Its lack of colour, drama and folksiness actually makes it more potent because more linked with a familiar setting.

This dichotomy in the perception of what constitutes story is appearing regularly elsewhere. At one extreme, story is something concocted and used to condition behaviour and mood. Indeed, in Stephen Denning’s book there is a careful breakdown of the different intentions in the use of the story and how to achieve them through correct choice of material and technique

¹ The Springboard Stephen Denning, Butterworth-Heinemann 2001

of delivery. This aims to encourage morale, confidence, co-operation, problem-solving and compliance or group solidarity.

In the big wide world of technology, industry and finance – the world on which we all, however resentfully, depend and which exerts enormous power over our lives – the effect of oral and imaginative narrative is being widely examined. Indeed, one consultant known to me recently received great interest from the top level of a household name aero-engine company, in a training programme based on *The Wizard of Oz* (which, although not of course an oral story, at least exemplifies one kind of imaginative narrative).

Some of the pronouncements² arising from this scene are soulful and illuminating and an example to professional storytellers of simplicity and humanity. “The purpose of storytelling in organisations”, writes Yannis Gabriel, “is to ameliorate human suffering.” In a characteristic down-to-earth fashion, Gabriel asserts that stories “represent symbolic means of coping with pain,” and “deal with life’s harshness, unpredictability and arbitrariness”. He argues that while political and social programmes might promise solutions to the unequal distribution of wealth and power, the unequal distribution of suffering eludes human efforts at resolution, and stories are one of our responses. They make life bearable, both consoling us for the trauma in our memories and fortifying us for what we must face in the future. Gabriel quotes many “post-modernist” commentators who stress the primary of story in human communication and self-awareness even though the narrative is merely implicit in media images, logos, headlines, adverts and so on. Storytelling is resurgent in unlikely places like the corporate office, he stresses, because the deluge of information we now receive threatens to drown out meaning. Story has, since time immemorial, offered the human race the possibility of meaning.

He makes a careful distinction between stories, opinions (which exclude incident), proto-stories (narrative scraps which have no ending), and reports (which exclude emotion). In his conclusion he offers a useful definition of story which emphasises generation of emotion, symbolic power, conflict and coincidence. But he also makes a big distinction between stories as they circulate spontaneously within modern organisations, and mythology. The latter, he writes, has greater grandeur and sense of the uniqueness of the event described. He

² Storytelling in Organisations Yannis Gabriel, Oxford 2000.

then apparently contradicts himself and unwittingly exemplifies the durability of myth, when we read his sections on Nostalgia and Facing God in which, it seems clear to me from the titles themselves, the organisational story contains a strong echo of myth – of the Great Old Stories – even though the God figure is the boss of the organisation. The themes of being aided by, being in conflict with and being abandoned by the Divine are all described. These are all fundamental elements of myth.

However, other writers seem to ignore the mystery and subtlety of the medium. Denning's book is an example. Most of his incidents from corporate life I would describe as anecdote. They are in narrative form, they have some interest and usefulness, but they lack major elements far more significant than just "plot..... celebration.... building up of characters." These elements are the very things which made the old tales thrilling and disturbing, and I will return to them.

There was a hint of this duality at last year's tenth birthday celebration of the SFS, in the contrasting presentations of Joan Barr and Grace Hallworth. Joan illustrated her work on the Sands of Time project on the Lincolnshire coast. A local controversy arose around the setting up of a Wildlife Reserve, and ill feeling lasted long after. A lot of moving work was eventually done with Joan's help using the memories of those involved as they narrated their individual experiences of the disputes. Feelings were recognised, steps towards resolution and reconciliation were taken. This exemplified the invaluable role someone with an ear for narrative can play in a community, when that narrative facilitates empathy and understanding. While of immense value, this sounded to me like the realm of reminiscence, anecdote, oral history, when compared to that which Grace described in her complementary address. She portrayed the role of the storyteller in an uncompromising fashion, which I paraphrase. The storyteller, she said, opens the doors on another world; his/her role is liminal – standing at the threshold of the spirit world. The teller must be and must assist others to become transported, carried as if by wings into another land which exists beyond the familiar world. Here strange and familiar melodies fill the ear, the wine of marvels pours down the throat. This version of story looks like the other end of the spectrum.

Yet when a colleague recently asked a group of corporate managers to identify the most motivating story they could think of, they chose The Grail legend, thus apparently

transcending the division I have made. This tale is clearly alive and well somewhere within contemporary culture, as for many centuries. It amply fulfils my criteria for fully-fledged story. Its meaning is not easily definable, it is full of paradox and absurdity and in the Mallory version at least, the advent of The Grail is a major step towards the disintegration of the organisation (of the Round Table), not its strengthening.

For story fully-fledged contains the great old images that refuse to go away, that are rich and disturbing because their meaning cannot be pinned down; the Lindworm, the Minotaur, the Amazon, the Elf Queen. It's emotions and actions are savage, raw and immoderate, the supernatural and irrational rule: animals speak, miracles occur and misfortunes are dire. Characters kill, torture, kidnap and perform acts of utterly selfless generosity. Hidden patterns and currents that govern the ebb and flow of luck and destiny are uncovered. The effects of these stories on the human mind cannot be foreseen, but we return to them again and again. Sometimes they do indeed motivate us. Sometimes they just give voice to our anguish or our bafflement and we know that someone else, somewhere, has understood it.

In the end though, the division between the prosaic and the mythic, waking life and dream, everyday and extraordinary, anecdote and myth, does not remain absolute. Some years ago I carried out reminiscence work in Nailsworth with long-time residents of the town, and soon discovered that what lived in real memory as fact was as bizarre and colourful as the "inventions" of wonder or trickster tale. The blacksmith who could spit out a candle from the opposite side of the room, the doctor who always walked backwards uphill, the woman who always sat outside because the fire she'd made to warm her home made it too hot – these were characters as graphic as any in a Jack story. The "otherworld" is not completely separate from this world, which can be as strange and wonderful as wonder tale. This does become more difficult to remember, as we retreat into the insulated capsules of our houses and cars, as we standardise ourselves and separate ourselves from the storms and droughts, the miracles and disasters. Or if we become too concerned to see just how story can be used for the benefit of our company, and progressively tone down its subversion of our goals, aspirations and vanities.

The more prosaic narratives, the incidents that people relate to each other in conversation have enormous worth. They are not actually divided from the Great Stories, but contain

echoes of them and are joined on a continuum linking many types of narrative. It is the excluding or ignoring of part of the spectrum that cheats and counterfeits. In the Great Stories, behaviour is usually savage or passionate – feelings are extreme. The supernatural, the magical and the wonderous intervene forcefully. Fate and providence respond to character and behaviour according to certain patterns (e.g. the animal given assistance by the hero later saves him). Waking life can also be like this, though not, for most of us most of the time, everyday life. But if I try to define this division too exactly, I fall into the trap. You know you're hearing story when you feel the proximity of mysterious but ubiquitous undercurrents, when there is a surge of energy that carries you across an invisible threshold. Yet there are many steps towards this. I ask only that those taking one of those steps should recognise and honour the direction in which it leads.