

The Power of the Story

Myths and Stories. Heroes and Archetypes. Just as universal and natural as the air we breathe or the light in our eyes. And, just as essential for living and surviving. For Great Stories established civilizations, built nations, lead armies to victory, and created bonds between tribes. With the Power of a Story we can create markets, build brands, lead organisations and connect people.

There's a growing interest in Stories. This renewed interest is growing within a historical context, marking no less than a structural reverse in Western thought, which has been dominated by the Enlightenment and Rationalism for ages. Last century we learnt that the Enlightenment also had a dark side to it and that Reason was only Unreasonable. At the same time we experienced that stories were not just fiction, an emotional substitute for reliable facts and numbers. Stories are a means of understanding beyond reason and with their own logics. These last years, there's a rehabilitation of the Story going on. For ages, stories have enjoyed no more than a marginal status as 'calculated nonsense'. But these days, stories and myths make a triumphant come-back to form the heart of many disciplines as a source of insight and understanding. Not only in humanities and social studies, but in management, marketing and communication practice as well. (1)

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In **The Dream Society**, Rolf Jensen shows that the winner of the new economy will be the organization with the best Story. "Businesses need to imagine their futures the way good novelists imagine their stories. The company with the best story wins..." Harvard Business Review tells us that one of the most important talents our great Leaders of the future need, is the ability to tell a good story. "[...] few talents are more important to managerial success than knowing how to tell a good story. If the story is good enough, it can also lift individuals and organizations to take the risks that keep life an adventure" . (2)

In *The Experience Economy*, Pine & Gilmore explain to us that the ability to stage an experience - a way of telling a story - is a great economical good. "Experiences are as distinct from services as services are from goods. When a person buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages - as in a theatrical play - to engage him in a personal way." The Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning conference, held a short time ago in London, had 'Corporate Storytelling' as one of its themes. In the brochure, we read: "The ability of story to transmit a powerful meaning with intensity has enormous significance for performance in communication, knowledge elicitation, cultural change and cross culture understanding. Organisations such as 3M, Xerox, IBM, English Nature, NASA, The World Bank, Intel and Microsoft are actively using story techniques to handle complex management issues."

In short: the Story itself, as well as the use of the Skills and Knowledge involved in telling a Story are very well worth further study.

Narrativity

Storytelling is a thing of all times and all cultures. There's an innate skill called 'narrativity', meaning the universal ability of humans to tell stories and create myths, as well as the urge to do so. The narrativity and the stories it creates are not just there to divert and amuse, but rather to provide insight and understanding, meaning and sense. "Narrative is one of the fundamental ways we organise and understand the world" .(3)

We use the logic of a story and we tell stories in order to get to know and understand, create and give shape to the world, life, the past, the present, the future, each other and ourselves. "The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms." (4)

Stories are 'dolce et utile', they combine use with pleasure, education with entertainment. We enjoy stories, and we never seem to get enough of a good story. What's more, even a bad story can capture our minds, be it simply because we're eager to know the ending. Stories have knowledge, wisdom and information, and they know how to pass it on: in an attractive and easy way, through their structure and development. Stories teach us. There's no better explanation than a good story. All Great Masters

were Great Storytellers too. Stories have a psychological function. Some stories touch you so deeply they open your eyes and strongly influence or even alter your life. Stories bring comfort and consolation. The story touches our emotions and even brings about physical reactions; we laugh, we cry, we're on the edge of our seats and feel the physical tension relax when all proves well in the end. Stories touch us rationally and emotionally, psychologically and physically. In fact, stories communicate with our whole being. Here we can see the difference with persuasive communication, which only appeals to reason and tries to persuade with rational arguments. Narrative communication does exactly the opposite: through recognition and identification, it simply invites us to believe.

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Where does the Power of the Story come from? Why does a Story effect us so diverse and deeply? In short: how can we explain the effectiveness of the Story as a means of communication? The answer is to be found in the in-depth structure of the story. Beyond forms, genres, motives, patterns and themes. When talking about the in-depth structure of a story, we're talking of the narrative system; the narrative grammar and syntax, or rather the way in which the narrative logic fundamentally organizes the elements to form a round story with a beginning, a center and an end. This structuring in time also determines the meaning and function of the events that take place. There's a huge difference between the function of a wedding at the beginning of a story (like *The Godfather*) and a wedding at the end. A wedding at the beginning of a story communicates that there's trouble ahead, while a wedding at the end tells us that problems are over and that they'll live happily ever after. The narrative meaning and function of beginning, center and end is imitation and staging of 'the dance of life'. All it imitates and expresses is life experience. According to Joseph Campbell, the function of the beginning is 'Separation'. The Hero leaves the 'Nest', a place familiar to him, in order to seek adventure.

The function of the center is 'Initiation'. The Hero enters dark and unfamiliar surroundings, undergoes an ordeal, meets resistance, in other words: he learns something about life. The end of the story stands for 'Return' or 'Integration'. The Hero comes back from the dark, enlightened and blessed with a treasure: the fruit of his experience, which he can share with the Community or a Beloved.

Different explanations of this journey exist. In the cosmic, spiritual approach, it is seen as the pattern of Birth, Life and Death. Our Soul comes from above and descends to learn her lessons. In the end she goes back home. With a broken illusion, yet with a new experience in her heart. Through a more psychological approach, the journey can be seen as the process of growing up psychologically and emotionally. In the beginning, you're a child in the Nest. Then you leave the Nest and start a life of your own. Through experience, you become an adult, until you've become an integrated individual. With the fruit of all the experience you've gained, you make a Nest for the next generation. The poetic approach regards this journey as the process of being born; you're expelled from Paradise (the Nest), go through a dark and daunting channel in order to find the light and start a new life. The in-depth structure of the Story is also a 'script' for every crisis in life. Your basis gets structurally imbalanced, you fall into a deep, dark pit until you touch rock bottom. You fight your way out and up. And once you're up, you're a better and stronger human being than before. Whichever explanation you prefer, they have one thing in common. On the in-depth structure as well as the in-depth psychological level, the Power of the Story is that it touches your full being, and for a moment allows you to experience life. Hollywood script guru Robert McKee (of McKee?) has captured this idea, saying that "Story is life". A good story draws its energy from this source, suits it with hands and feet and passes on the energy. Like a light bulb that can only shine when correctly plugged and in its fitting.

(1) Wallace. *Recent Theories of Narrative*.

(2) Michael Hattersly, Jan 1997 V2N1 (@Ashraf, even voor de zekerheid: hier stond 'Micheal', maar ik neem aan dat het 'Michael' moet zijn?)

(3) F. McConnel. (@of McConnel?) *Storytelling & Mythmaking*, 1979.

(4) Muriel Ruckeyser