

The Human Story

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My Somewhat Intimate Relationship with Storytelling

Throughout history and in all cultures, humans have attached great importance to art and writing. It seems very unlikely that this could be a coincidence; there has to be some sort of driving urge that forces us to express ourselves through our creations. I want to develop my own theory to account for the importance of self-expression and abstraction to the human mind. To this end, I consulted specialists in the history of myth, popular culture, and behavioral psychology. I learned that processes of storytelling and abstraction are unique to humans. In fact, our consciousness is not an entity; it is a narrative. That narrative is created from our past experiences. However, we are not fully in control of the story we write because we are held in suspense as to when and how our end will come. Ultimately, the reason we relate to stories so strongly is that they inform our own journey through life.

While I am fascinated with why we tell stories, talking about storytelling in a purely analytical format is far too removed and soulless way to discuss this living art. It became apparent to me that a comic book would be my ideal way to express my thinking because comic books combine writing and images, two of the most common and well recognized mediums for storytelling. The simplicity of comics also allows readers to easily insert themselves into the story. My finished comic incorporates the information and spirit of my project in a relatable way.

What I would like the reader to take away from my project is that storytelling is even more deeply ingrained in our identity as a species that it would be apt to say that our very own humanity is, itself, a story.

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I am a storyteller. If I had to put one label on myself, that would be it. I use stories as a form of entertainment, a medium for my artwork, a vehicle with which to make a point- but the thread that runs through all of these is the idea of a story used as a tool. Storytelling has been used by mankind for as long as we have existed- many cultures passed on their history and traditions orally, through stories of their ancestors. Some psychologists theorize that the ability to visualize imaginary situations and convey them to other people is the primary difference between human beings and other animals. Storytelling is essential to our humanity. But why are stories so enduring throughout time and what draws us towards them so strongly? Why are fictional events and people so important and profound in our culture? What I will explore visually and through the force of my language is why we love stories, why we submit to them, and how stories stir our hearts and inspire our minds.

Storytelling in the modern age has evolved significantly. Our ancestors had to rely on the old, wise, or classically trained to be vessels of their culture and handle the delicate art of entertainment. While it is impossible to ever know the prehistoric origin of stories, historian Jack David Zipes proposes that “...we do know that humans began telling tales as soon as they developed the capacity of speech... Units of this information gradually formed the basis of narratives that enabled humans to learn about themselves and the worlds that they inhabited... They were simply told to mark an occasion, set an example, warn about danger, procure food, or explain what seemed inexplicable. People told stories to communicate knowledge and experience in social contexts.”¹ Storytelling has been an important means of trading information for as long as humans have had something to say to each other. Many of the ideas plot structure and development were not simply arbitrary- these ideas developed over time naturally as people discovered what struck a chord in the minds of their listeners. By the time print came into existence storytelling was already an essential component of the human identity.

Storytelling, however, is not just important to our identities in a cultural sense. There is also scientific merit to the idea that storytelling is a central part of our identities as human beings. In the Radiolab episode “*Who Am I?*”² the hosts interview both psychologists and victims of extraordinary circumstances on the topic of where exactly our sense of self – what some people think of as a soul – lies. We once thought it resided in the heart, then the brain – but how exactly do we develop our fragile ideas of identity and personality? According to many neurologists and psychologists, our identities are perhaps nothing more than a story that our brain tells itself. V.S. Ramachandran is a world renowned neurologist, who studies what abilities in our brain separate us from our simian ancestors. He does not believe in a soul per se, but instead that our unique sense of identity and self comes from our personal narrative. He claims that what makes human beings special is the idea of “introspective consciousness”. He goes on to assert many animals have a memory of some sort, and can associate images from their mind with real world. However, what they can’t do is apply these images to other things. They can remember that a kind of red fruit is good to eat, but if you asked that animal to imagine that another fruit is that same red color, they would be unable.

Maybe this is a bit of an exaggeration, but the information revealed by Ramachandran could suggest that what makes humans unique is their power of imagination. Memories, emotions, and long lasting trauma are all factors that come together to create a human being. If

¹ Zipes, Jack David. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: the Cultural and Social History of a Genre*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

² Adumrad, Jad, and Robert Krulwich. “Who Am I?” *Radiolab*, WNYC, www.radiolab.org/story/91496-who-am-i/.

this is the case, then it could be said that each of us *is* a story. Maybe this is why some people have such strong connections to fictional characters. If our personalities are created from our imperfect perceptions of a string of events and happenings, then what is the difference between a character and ourselves? True, a character's life only happens in our imagination, but then again our own reality is solely comprehended through our own brain. Perhaps this is why we can feel so intimately attached to the characters we experience only in stories: in our minds, and our own personal spheres, they are real. A good example of these things are religious and folklore figures. Although many prophets, spiritual leaders and folk heroes were actual people at a point in time their stories have become timelessly retold and no doubt exaggerated. Overtime, the story and the moral becomes more important than the actual person and their exploits and many people live by their fables. Their names become synonymous with the lessons they teach. In a sense, the story and the person become one and the same- equally real in the way they affect others.

The reason that these stories become so real in our minds is a balancing act between danger and reward. The tension of conflict and reward of intimacy comes from characters who take on a life of their own in our minds and who have a narrative that comes together to create that character's soul. Characters, just like people, are defined by their actions. French philosopher Roland Barthes wrote "In Aristotelian poetics, the notion of character is secondary, entirely subordinated to the notion of plot. There can be fables without characters, according to Aristotle, but there cannot be characters without fables."³ There's no reason to care about a character until you have a reason to root for them – you may identify with their struggle, they may seem familiar to you, but even if you are nothing like a character you can still relate to them by experiencing their personal narrative. Characters are easy to project onto, as they are less complex than other living people. Even people with directly opposed values and opinions to us are easier to stomach and understand when put into writing. Empathy is not exclusive to other people- our brains can only differentiate so far between the real and fake when it comes to our emotions. We are complicit in giving them life in our own imaginations using our personal perception. In this way, characters are our children and like many parents we live vicariously through them.

Once we give life to a character in our imaginations, we start to build a relationship with them. One reason that we immerse ourselves so fully in good stories is that they give us a powerful sense of intimacy that is difficult to achieve in real life. All of us crave intimacy, some more than others. Perhaps that is why people of the more lonely or reclusive persuasion are often avid readers, or film buffs. Strangely enough the way we build relationships with characters is not dissimilar from the way we grow close to real people. The pattern of conflict and reward, mentioned previously, in our investment in a character mirrors our patterns of intimacy in the physical world. In an article in *Psychology Now*, *The Radical Thrill of Intimacy*⁴, the authors make the point that the reason intimacy is such a rare and sought after feeling is that there is an inherent danger in opening yourself up to another person. In the words of Lisa A. Phillips, author and psychologist: "Social penetration theory, which defines the processes of relationships, holds that in building intimacy, whether with a friend or a romantic prospect, we engage in exploration. We venture forth with impersonal and superficial information to gauge the reaction of the other. A supportive response encourages an advance in self-disclosure, the proffering of more

³ Barthes, Roland, and Lionel Duisit. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." *Jstor*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, www.jstor.org/stable/468419.

⁴ Phillips, Lisa A. "The Radical Thrill of Intimacy." *Psychology Today*, 3 Jan. 2017, www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201701/the-radical-thrill-intimacy.

emotionally significant substance.” We are letting our guard down in an intimate relationship of any kind, and knocking down defenses we have built since our earliest years. Every time you reach out to another person, you are putting yourself at risk – of judgement, of rebuttal, of mockery – anything that you say or do can be used against you in the future. Making yourself so vulnerable for another person is dangerous, but when you find yourself growing intimate with a story or character, there is no risk. Maybe that is why many younger people have imaginary friends or older people talk to their pets, plants, or even possessions. The inanimate object does not have the capacity to betray us. If a supportive response to self-disclosure is unconditional acceptance, ensured beforehand, then a character is the best subject of intimacy for which we could hope- that is all they can provide. Some might report a certain kind of aching sadness when they complete a very good and spiritually charged books, shows, movies, or any other vehicle of stories. This is the aching pain of an intimate connection being severed. The characters of which we’ve seen so much are suddenly gone as quickly as they had appeared. A good story gives us a sense of understanding and empathy with our characters. We are likely to become bored with a horror movie if we don’t care at all that the main character is in danger.

However, while stories may provide us with a sense of intimacy with our characters, however, stories also provide us with a greater sense of intimacy with ourselves and our own daily lifelong struggles. Afterall, all stories are made by people who want to express their own experiences or feelings. Stories, even nonfiction, provide us with a fantasy. This fantasy an idea of structure – something which we constantly strive for but are hardly ever able to perfectly obtain. Joseph Campbell, one of the most acclaimed scholars in the study of myth, religion, and culture, wrote in his book *Myths to Live By* “All life is structure. In the biosphere, the more elaborate the structure, the higher the life form. The structure through which the energies of a starfish are inflected is considerably more complex than that of an amoeba; and as we come on up the line, say to the chimpanzee, complexity increases. So likewise in the human cultural sphere: the crude notion that energy and strength can be represented or rendered by abandoning and breaking structures is refuted by all that we know about the evolution and history of life.”⁵ Consider the classic plot structure. Exposition, followed by an introduction of conflict and rising action, and finally a resolution of the problem. This plot structure is not arbitrary and no coincidence. It is a manifestation of human desires and expectations reflected in our artwork. Everyone dreams of success, but success without conflict means nothing – our idea of a satisfying plot structure is a direct mirror of what we want in our lives. While there is no guarantee that we will ever achieve such a satisfying trade off of conflict and success in our own experience, we can live it through the vehicle of storytelling. As the literary critic Peter Brooks observes: “Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue.”⁶ Stories almost act as a guidebook to inform our personal narrative – they give direction and meaning to otherwise meaningless events.

This two way intimacy towards storytelling has become more common in the internet age. As people gradually became more educated and reading became more popular in general men and women from all different walks of life now grew to possess the means to write and share their own stories. The internet has brought this prospect a step further. In the Ted Talk *The*

⁵ Campbell, Joseph, and Johnson E. Fairchild. *Myths to Live By*. Souvenir Press (Educational Et Academic) Ltd, 2016.

⁶ Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Harvard University Press, 2003.

*Future of Storytelling*⁷ Shonda Rhimes, a TV producer involved in shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, proposes that in an age where anyone can write and create, everyone's a storyteller but the truly genius stories are more difficult to find. "I think there's [something] scary in the idea that you can't find the good work now... So there's a lot of bad stuff out there because everybody can make something. It's like if everybody painted a painting. You know, there's not that many good painters. But finding the good stories, the good shows, is harder and harder and harder. Because if you have one tiny show over here on AMC and one tiny show over here over there, finding where they are becomes much harder." But If it is true that imagination is what makes us human beings, shouldn't it be everyone's right to express themselves in an accessible form? I think that from a position of a skilled professional, producing looking down on the industry as a whole, it may seem as though these stories are less refined and polished, but the ability to record and share our own personal stories is an important part of living in a massive society, and ultimately all the great storytellers started at a personal and amateur level. Many stories are made with a very cynical motive- simply to make something that will appeal to as many demographics as possible. In this environment, not many stories can survive. These stories need to provide the feelings of intimacy and tension versus conflict that people crave, but don't have anything that could new or challenging for people to understand. This is an unfortunate situation for storytelling as artwork that is totally unchallenging is often lacking an element of soul and humanity that makes storytelling so unique and personal. Because of this, it becomes more and more important to look for stories which are more important to us. The flipside of there being more stories in the world is that there is more that will appeal to each individual person- we just need to figure out how to find it.

I have a very intimate relationship with stories. I share my stories for fun and utilize my stories for work when I need to make a point. I grew up with books and movies for company. I often felt an acute emotional pain when I finished a book series that I was very personally invested in.(The redwall series is a medieval children's story series that was practically the author's lifeswork. It had more volumes than I could even hope to finish, and when I realized that I had finally lost interest in the series, I felt a very peculiarly strong feeling of mourning.) The way that stories connect with people on such a visceral level has always fascinated me. All over the world, independently, civilizations have elected to record their history and share it with their descendants for thousands of years. I feel strongly that storytelling is central to our identity as human beings, no matter with which culture we happen to identify with. Not only has it been a form of entertainment and and passing on our history for many thousands of years, but stories help to inform that journey of our own life, and tell us that there will be a happy end. When I create, I feel as though I am tapping into this history somehow. Storytelling is a bit of an enigma.

Everyone likes a good story but barely anyone could tell you exactly why they care so much about fictional people and events. They can change our entire view of world with just a few choice words in the right context. Storytelling has such a cemented grip on our collective consciousness because it is truly central to our biological identity as human beings – they give us a vehicle to enter our own imaginations and offer an intimate and powerful feeling that is almost romantic. When we read a truly amazing story that touches our hearts, even if it makes sad or scared or angry, we keep coming back for more. Stories lay bare the most tender and protected parts of our fragile personalities. Just as we pour our hearts into our best writing, we also pour

⁷ Stivers, Shonda Rhimes and Cyndi. "The Future of Storytelling." *Shonda Rhimes and Cyndi Stivers: The Future of Storytelling* | TED Talk, www.ted.com/talks/shonda_rhimes_and_cyndi_stivers_the_future_of_storytelling.

our hearts into the the best we read. That is why I love writing, and music, and film. That is why I am a storyteller.

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