"Let me tell you a story…"

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Stories are an essential part of the human psyche and we can use them to communicate more effectively and even direct change in our own life.

So, according to the BBC's poll, Lord of the Rings is the UK's favourite book…

For some people this epic story will have been part of their lives for a long time. Others have yet to enter its world and experience what it means (if anything) to them.

Generally speaking as humans we love stories, so if Tolkien's epic doesn't quite do it for you then there's probably some other one that does. And the great thing is that everyone takes something different from a well written story because they read it from their own frame of reference. Something that appears simple and boring to one individual might strike a deep chord with another – open to a completely different and more powerful interpretation.

The same is true with our own lives – we act them out in the first person and often see them from only one perspective. But in our own lives and businesses – we should remember that we are the storyteller as well as the character. We should occasionally stand outside our lives and look dispassionately at the plot. Does it hang together – should it be re-written – is it becoming too predictable?

So how would you describe **your** story's plot? What's happening and how? Is it a plot that has been encountered before or do you maybe think that it's unique? As you think about that you might want be interested to know that there are probably only four different basic story types.

Have you heard about…

Stories and storytelling are important. Why? Well, let's take a business example: just consider how hard it can be to communicate that new seven-point strategy that you've slaved over. You know, the one that will completely revolutionise the way you do business. I mean you've tried haven't you? The points are listed on your web site along with a detailed description of the rationale behind each. You've printed it on a handout for anyone in the company to read and you've published it in your company newsletter. Yet somehow it seems as if it remains as occult knowledge to all but those involved in its birth.

Now contrast that with the effectiveness with which the latest rumour from accounts has spread around… true or not it can't be stopped. It seems to have a life of its own. What critical knowledge lives in the form of stories in your business?

Look at the popular press. What are they writing and selling do you think? Is it news or stories? In your view which newspapers have the lowest news/story ratio and how does that correlate with their sales figures? Simply put: stories sell newspapers and journalists need to be very good at writing them.

Wouldn't it be good to know how it can be that stories attract and engage us the way they do? And how can we create and use stories to make our process of communicating even more effective?

The metaphor machine

"The human mind is a storytelling device, a metaphor machine…it's how our minds work. It's a trick we use to simplify things that would otherwise be incomprehensible."[1]

The current general belief is that language and intelligence co-evolved, and that both are strongly influenced by context. That ought to ring bells with anyone who has studied neuro linguistic programming (NLP) – one of the principles being "all meaning is context dependent." And, in an NLP sense, the use of metaphor is a key that opens many of the doors in our mind whether we're aware of it or not.

So, we communicate using stories, we learn through stories, we share knowledge through stories. Our minds assign meaning to symbols

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[1] Ian Stewart, Jack Cohen and Terry Pratchett; "The science of Discworld II" (No, really. If you haven't read it you might want to. It's an entertaining hard science/fictional account of the emergence of "mind" on our planet. Actually it draws significantly from Stewart and Cohen's previous work such as "Figments of reality" which you can read a thorough review of online in the e-journal Psyche [ISSN: 1039-723X].)

whether they are pictures, icons on your computer screen or words written down. As a simple example, let's play this Jungian game:

1. Think of a particular issue in your life at the moment that you'd like advice on.

2. Pick a favourite book that you have to hand.

3. Flick through and settle on any page at random.

4. Point immediately to any sentence on the page and read it.

5. So, what are the major insights that sentence provides you on your subject? (You might need to read a little either side to get the full meaning.)

Now I can't say that you'll get the insights immediately, for some people it can take a little longer. And yet you will get them – now think about it, that text wasn't written with you or your issue in mind was it? You've just successfully demonstrated how well your mind works as a metaphor machine!

This works because we make sense of language – all language – metaphorically. We understand by searching back through our stored experiences for meanings that we can associate to the words we read or hear. And of course everyone has a unique set of those, so you can begin to understand how different people can interpret messages differently.

Travelling down inside

Now, just imagine if the "story" you've just read had been constructed in a more purposeful way. With some knowledge of you, your background and your present situation and with a specific outcome in mind: how much more impact could it have had? How can we construct a story – a metaphor – that will really resonate with the people that we are communicating with?

Well, simply, there are three components to a metaphor for our purposes. The first thing is to remember that in order to make sense of a word the listener or reader has to go inside and check out their own associations and meanings for it (in NLP speak this is termed a TDS or trans-derivational search.)

Secondly when the metaphor is constructed using (artfully) vague language – such as "I once knew a person who…" or "some people…" – then we tend to hear the story as in terms of our own experiences. In these last examples, as if we were the person in the story. This causes the listener/reader to enter into the story

and begin to feel the way the person in the story might be feeling; to see and hear the kind of things they might be seeing and hearing and so on. The listener becomes entranced – you know how it can be when you're listening to a really good play on the radio – you go somewhere else, don't you? Once there, other objects can take on special meanings – symbolism again. It's no wonder is it that a long time ago stories used to be called spells!

Finally, the structure of the metaphor should be matched to the intended audience's situation and experiences – and your desired outcome. It should be isomorphic with their reality. Isomorphism describes the mind's ability to map information from one context to another – something termed cross-class learning. I'm sure you've heard or read about a CEO who is a "captain of industry steering his ship to safe harbour." That's isomorphism for you.

Those are the key elements that you can begin to use to construct metaphors – stories – that will connect more powerfully with their audience and so produce deeper and longer-lasting effects. There's more that we could go in to of course, but the best thing to do is practise constructing a few stories now and notice how well they work when you use them purposefully.

And they all lived…

And which of the four basic story types can you identify with right now? Here they are (by the way, for "man" I mean human being, but if you choose to then please read man or woman):

1. Man vs. Self

2. Man vs. Man

3. Man vs. Nature

4. Man vs. "It"

Oh, that's "it" as in some kind of monster or unfathomable alien force…definitely not IT as in Information technology and I wouldn't want you to think that they were at all the same...

According to George Bernard Shaw (who was obviously operating at a very abstract level) "There are only two stories. 'Cinderella' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk.'"

What if you were to take charge of writing your own life's story right now? What metaphor would you use to describe where you are, where you want to be and how you're going to get there? If you were the hero or heroine (imagine now what that could be like) what are you going to do? What happens next in your story? What's in the next chapter? We'd love to know.