

# Narratives

by Bill Herbst

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Human beings love stories. We grow up being told stories, and this continues through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. If we live long enough to die in our beds at the end of a long life, we are probably ushered out being told some of the same stories we heard as infants. If no one's around at the end to repeat the stories, we may remember many of them anyway. Even if we don't recall them consciously, the stories we absorbed are still part of the deep memory circuits that were constructed early on as part of our reality foundation.

We love pleasing stories, but we also seem to love horror stories. Good plots, bad plots; interesting characters, boring characters; happy endings, unhappy endings — at any given time, we may be more drawn to some stories than others, but there's no telling which of them will impress us the most.

Another word for stories is "narratives." That word has recently emerged and come into popular use in America. When I was growing up a long time ago, during the second half of the 20th century, nobody talked about narratives. Well, English Lit professors and reviewers of novels or plays did, but that was about it. Now, however, as we stumble through the craziness of 2020 America, the word has carved out a widening niche in common parlance. Bottom line, though — whether in literary fiction or politics — is that *narrative* is essentially just a fancier word for *story*.

One reason that narrative has arisen and spread into widespread usage is that another previously cherished concept — truth — has fallen from its pedestal. We no longer know what the truth is. In fairness, we never really knew what the truth was, but we believed that we did — not all of the people all of the time, of course, but many of us for much of our time. A majority of people felt secure that they knew the truth when they saw it, heard it, or read it. Over the initial two decades of the current century, however, that certainty of belief (that we know or even can know what is true and what isn't) has eroded to the point that knowing the truth or even pursuing it is now fraught with uncertainty.

As much as we like stories, we *don't* like uncertainty. As a species, our psychological tolerance for doubt, ambiguity, and ambivalence are quite limited. What I mean by "limited tolerance" here is our ability to continue functioning effectively in the conscious presence — the sentient awareness — of uncertainty. That state is typically accompanied by confusion and anxiety. Feeling uncertain

undermines our ability to make decisions and act with confidence, but, even more, it's uncomfortable for us emotionally.

As our faith in our ability to perceive the truth has declined, we've shifted into Plan B. Now we shore up our need for certainty by substituting our preferred narratives for the truth. Oh, we still call what we believe "true," but what we're often referring to is whichever story we like best.

This isn't new. The dominance of narrative (i.e., stories) in influencing what we believe to be true has been with us forever. If you wish to convince someone of the truth of something — anything, really — don't argue with reason and facts. Facts won't take you very far with creatures whose emotion-generating limbic brains are still in charge, and whose neocortexes (with their functions of rational intellect) are still merely the servants of more primal and unconscious emotions. Instead, tell them a story that activates their feelings, either positively, through hope, or negatively, through fear.

Marketers know this. Want to sell someone something? Tell them a compelling story. In marketing, truth is nothing and narrative is everything. And, given that America has always been primarily about marketing and is now damned near totally about selling stuff — products, ideas, philosophies, social policies, personal moralities, and even cosmologies — narrative is what matters. Narrative is the key to money, power, success, privilege, and influence.

So, in economics, which narrative appeals to you — Capitalism? Socialism? Marxism? Neoliberalism? In religion, is it Christianity? Buddhism? New Age Metaphysics? Atheism? In politics, do you prefer the stories of the Democratic or Republican parties? The narratives of MSNBC or Fox News? Are you drawn more to the historical stories of racism from Black Lives Matter or the overarching conspiracy theories of QAnon? Were you moved by the perspectives rolled out this past week during the Democrats' virtual convention? Or will you cotton more to the bedtime stories for children that will be told and shown this week at the Republicans' love-fest for Trump, which are akin to Grimm fairy tales with scary monsters, perpetual danger, and magical rescue?

*[For people like me who don't like the American Empire, neither major party's narrative is convincing. The Republicans are obviously despicable, but I don't trust the Democrats as far as I can throw them. Of course, no one I'd approve of has a snowball's chance in hell of becoming President.]*

Whether in politics or ads for cars, all of the stories pose as Truth. Each of them uses some facts and logic (whether accurate or bogus) to appeal to the viewer's neocortex, but none of them relies on rational "arguments" to actually convince anyone or close the deal. They're all narratives — stories designed to appeal to human emotions. They're essentially sales pitches intended to activate and expand existing desires or instill new ones: *Buy what we're selling!*

Rather than suggest that this is a sorry, deplorable, or even tragic way to determine the truth for fallible human beings, I'll take a more neutral stance in this commentary. It's the way things are and the best we can do at this stage of collective human evolution. Yeah, I wish there were a better way than this, but we're not close to finding or adopting it yet (and may never be for all I know).

Not that no one cares or tries for something better. Historians talk about primary or direct versus indirect sources in their academic research. Science is an elegant methodology, although admittedly limited, for distinguishing objective versus subjective data. But even our best efforts to pursue the truth come a cropper in the crucible of real life. In law, for instance, juries are routinely selected to support certain inherent biases. Circumstantial evidence is not weighted in trials as much as eyewitness testimony, but witnesses' memories have been shown to be badly flawed and subject to change over time.

Basically, no one is in a position to have a reliable, dependable, or all-encompassing handle on the Truth. That was the case back in hunter-gatherer times, and it's even more so in modern civilization. No, narrative story-telling is clearly an influential factor in determining what we assume or believe to be true, and we rely on it, for better and (too often) for worse.

Each of us cherry-picks from all the different narratives to which we are exposed. We reject the stories we don't like, ignore the narratives that don't speak to us one way or another, and choose the ones that appeal to us most. I do, you do, everyone does. It's how we maintain (or try to maintain) some semblance of certainty and emotional comfort in a world where happiness coexists with suffering, where beauty and ugliness are both present, where illusion and reality intertwine, and where human beings will do anything to convince others to give them what they want, or at least to go along with it.

Right now, in the maelstrom of 2020, and especially in America, we've reached fever pitch in the urgent competition between conflicting narratives. Not that reality cares much, if at all. We've reached the point where all our narratives are beginning to look threadbare as reality hits us again and again, harder and harder. The solution, of course, is not new and spiffier narratives, but letting go of illusions and facing reality more honestly.

From where I sit, it doesn't appear that we're ready to do that.