

The Most Human Art

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We have been telling stories to one another for a long time, perhaps for as long as we have been using language, and we have been using language, I suspect, for as long as we have been human. In all its guises, from words spoken and written to pictures and musical notes and mathematical symbols, language is our distinguishing gift, our hallmark as a species.

We delight in stories, first of all, because they are a playground for language, an arena for exercising this extraordinary power. The spells and enchantments that figure in so many tales remind us of the ambiguous potency in words, for creating or destroying, for binding or setting free. Italo Calvino, a wizard of storytelling, described literature as “a struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said; what stirs literature is the call and attraction of what is not in the dictionary.” Calvino's remark holds true, I believe, not just for the highfalutin’ modes we label as literature, but for every effort to make sense of our lives through narrative.

Second, stories create community. They link teller to listeners, and listeners to one another. This is obviously so when speaker and audience share the same space, as humans have done for all but the last few centuries of our million-year history; but it is equally if less obviously so in our literate age, when we encounter more of our stories in solitude, on page or screen. When two people discover they have both read Don Quixote, they immediately share a piece of history and become thereby less strange to one another.

The strongest bonds are formed by sacred stories, which unite entire peoples. Thus Jews rehearse the events of Passover; Christians tell of a miraculous birth and death and resurrection; Buddhists tell of Gautama meditating beneath a tree. As we know only too well, sacred stories may also divide the world between those who are inside the circle and those who are outside, a division that has inspired pogroms and inquisitions and wars. There is danger in story, as in any great force. If the tales that captivate us are silly or deceitful, like most of those offered by television and advertising, they waste our time and warp our desires. If they are cruel, they make us callous. If they are false and bullying, instead of drawing us into a thoughtful community they may lure us into an unthinking herd or, worst of all, into a crowd screaming for blood—in which case we need other, truer stories to renew our vision. So *The Diary of Anne Frank* is an antidote to *Mein Kampf*. So Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an antidote to the paranoid yarns of the Ku Klux Klan. Just as stories may rescue us from loneliness, so, by speaking to us in private, they may rescue us from mobs.

This brings me to the third item on my list: **Stories help us to see through the eyes of other people.** Here my list overlaps with one compiled by Carol Bly, who argues in “Six Uses of Story” that the foremost gift from stories is “experience of other.” For the duration of a story, children may sense how it is to be old, and the elderly may recall how it is to be young; men may try on the experiences of women, and women those of men. Through stories, we reach across the rifts not only of gender and age, but also of race and creed, geography and class, even the rifts between species or between enemies.

Folk tales and fables and myths often show humans talking and working with other animals, with trees, with rivers and stones, as if recalling or envisioning a time of easy commerce among all beings. Helpful ducks and cats and frogs, wise dragons, stolid oaks, all have lessons for us in these old tales. Of course no storyteller can literally become hawk or pine, any more

than a man can become a woman; we cross those boundaries only imperfectly, through leaps of imagination. “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” Thoreau asks. We come nearer to achieving that miracle in stories than anywhere else.

A fourth power of stories is to show us the consequences of our actions. To act responsibly, we must be able to foresee where our actions might lead; and stories train our sight. They reveal the patterns of human conduct, from motive through action to result. Whether or not a story has a moral purpose, therefore, it cannot help but have a moral effect, for better or worse. An Apache elder, quoted by the anthropologist Keith Basso, puts the case directly: “Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right. Stories make you replace yourself.” Stories do work on us, on our minds and hearts, showing us how we might act, who we might become, and why.

So we arrive at a **fifth power of stories, which is to educate our desires.** Instead of playing on our selfishness and fear, stories can give us images for what is truly worth seeking, worth having, worth doing. I mean here something more than the way fairy tales repeat our familiar longings. I mean the way *Huckleberry Finn* makes us want to be faithful, the way *Walden* makes us yearn to confront the essential facts of life. What stories at their best can do is lead our desires in new directions—away from greed, toward generosity; away from suspicion, toward sympathy; away from an obsession with material goods, toward a concern for spiritual goods. One of the spiritual goods I cherish is the peace of being at home, in family and neighborhood and community and landscape. Much of what I know about becoming intimate with one’s home ground I have learned from reading the testaments of individuals who have decided to stay put. The short list of my teachers would include Lao-tzu and Thoreau and Faulkner, Thomas Merton, Black Elk, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Gary Snyder, and Wendell Berry.

Their work exemplifies the **sixth power of stories, which is to help us dwell in place.** According to Eudora Welty, herself a deeply rooted storyteller, “the art that speaks most clearly, explicitly, directly, and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood.” So we return to the epic of Gilgamesh, with its brooding on the forests and rivers of Babylonia; we return to the ancient Hebrew accounts of a land flowing with milk and honey; we follow the Aboriginal songs of journeys over the continent of Australia—because they all convey a passionate knowledge of place.

Native American tribes ground their stories in nearby fields and rivers and mountains, and thus carry their places in mind. As the Pueblo travel in their homeland, according to Leslie Marmon Silko, they recall the stories that belong to each mesa and arroyo, and “thus the continuity and accuracy of the oral narratives are reinforced by the landscape—and the Pueblo interpretation of that landscape is maintained.”

Stories of place help us recognize that we belong to the earth, blood and brain and bone, and that we are kin to other creatures. Life has never been easy, yet in every continent we find tales of a primordial garden, an era of harmony and bounty. In *A God Within*, René Dubos suggests that these old tales might be recollections “of a very distant past when certain groups of people had achieved biological fitness to their environment.” Whether or not our ancestors ever lived in ecological balance, if we aspire to do so in the future, we must nourish the affectionate, imaginative bond between person and place.

Mention of past and future brings us to the **seventh power of stories, which is to help us dwell in time.** I am thinking here not so much of the mechanical time parceled out by clocks as

of historical and psychological time. History is public, a tale of influences and events that have shaped the present; the mind's time is private, a flow of memory and anticipation that continues, in eddies and rapids, for as long as we are conscious. Narrative orients us in both kinds of time, private and public, by linking before and after within the lives of characters and communities, by showing action leading on to action, moment to moment, beginning to middle to end.

Once again we come upon the tacit morality of stories, for moral judgment relies, as narrative does, on a belief in cause and effect. Stories teach us that every gesture, every act, every choice we make sends ripples of influence into the future. Thus we hear that the caribou will only keep giving themselves to the hunter if the hunter kills them humbly and respectfully. We hear that all our deeds are recorded in some heavenly book, in the grain of the universe, in the mind of God, and that everything we sow we shall reap.

Stories gather experience into shapes we can hold and pass on through time, much the way DNA molecules in our cells record genetic discoveries and pass them on. Until the invention of writing, the discoveries of the tribe were preserved and transmitted by storytellers, above all by elders. "Under hunter-gatherer conditions," Jared Diamond observes, "the knowledge possessed by even one person over the age of 70 could spell the difference between survival and starvation for a whole clan."

Aware of time passing, however, we mourn things passing away, and we often fear the shape of things to come. Hence our need for the **eighth power of stories, which is to help us deal with suffering, loss, and death**. From the Psalms to the Sunday comics, many tales comfort the fearful and the grieving; they show the weak triumphing over the strong, love winning out over hatred, laughter defying misery. It is easy to dismiss this hopefulness as escapism, but as Italo Calvino reminds us, "For a prisoner, to escape has always been a good thing, and an individual escape can be a first necessary step toward a collective escape." Those who have walked through the valley of the shadow of death, tell stories as a way of fending off despair. Thus Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tells of surviving the Soviet gulag; Toni Morrison recounts the anguish of plantation life; Black Elk tells about the slaughter of the buffalo and the loss of his Lakota homeland. Those of us who have not lived through horrors must still face losing all that we love, including our own lives. Stories reek of our obsession with mortality. As the most enchanting first line of a tale is "once upon a time," so the most comforting last line is "and they lived happily ever after." This fairy tale formula expresses a deep longing not only for happiness, but also for ever-afterness, for an assurance that life as well as happiness will endure, that it will survive all challenges, perhaps even the grave. We feel the force of that longing, whether or not we believe that it can ever be fulfilled.

The **ninth item on my list is really a summation of all that I have said thus far: Stories teach us how to be human**. We are creatures of instinct, but not solely of instinct. More than any other animal, we must learn how to behave. In this perennial effort, as Ursula Le Guin says, "Story is our nearest and dearest way of understanding our lives and finding our way onward." Skill is knowing how to do something; wisdom is knowing when and why to do it, or to refrain from doing it. While stories may display skill aplenty, in technique or character or plot, what the best of them offer is wisdom. They hold a living reservoir of human possibilities, telling us what has worked before, what has failed, where meaning and purpose and joy might be found. At the heart of many tales is a test, a riddle, a problem to solve; and that, surely, is the condition of our lives, both in detail—as we decide how to act in the present moment—and in general, as we seek to understand what it all means. Like so many characters, we are lost in a

dark wood, a labyrinth, a swamp, and we need a trail of stories to show us the way back to our true home.

Our ultimate home is the Creation, and anyone who pretends to comprehend this vast and intricate abode is either a lunatic or a liar. In spite of all that we have learned through millennia of inquiry, we still dwell in mystery. Why there is a universe, why we are here, why there is life or consciousness at all, where if anywhere the whole show is headed—these are questions for which we have no final answers. Not even the wisest of tales can tell us. The wisest, in fact, **acknowledge the wonder and mystery of Creation—and that is the tenth power of stories.** In the beginning, we say, at the end of time, we say, but we are only guessing. “I think one should work into a story the idea of not being sure of all things,” Borges advised, “because that’s the way reality is.” The magic and romance, the devils and divinities we imagine, are pale tokens of the forces at play around us. The elegant, infinite details of the world’s unfolding, the sheer existence of hand or tree or star, are more marvelous than anything we can say about them. A number of modern physicists have suggested that the more we learn about the universe, the more it seems like an immense, sustained, infinitely subtle flow of consciousness—the more it seems, in fact, like a grand story, lavishly imagined and set moving. In scriptures we speak of God’s thoughts as if we could read them; but we read only by the dim light of a tricky brain on a young planet near a middling star. Nonetheless, we need these cosmic narratives, however imperfect they may be, however filled with guesswork. So long as they remain open to new vision, so long as they are filled with awe, they give us hope of finding meaning within the great mystery.

[excerpted from the author’s “The Power of Story”]