

What Makes Good Story

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Contents

1. What is Story and Who Are the Storytellers
2. Bad Story, or Not Story at All
3. Story Regenerates, It's Not Just Telling
4. How Story Can Be Used to Tackle Contemporary Crises
5. Story Structure and Intent
6. How Story Can Help Organisations
7. How Story Can Create Better Policy Outcomes
8. Fifty-Two Key References on Story



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1. What is Story and Who Are the Storytellers

Story is a simple device common to every human culture. It has some 50,000 years of history, yet has often come to be both misunderstood and misused in the modern era.

Put simply, the patterns of good story match the shapes of our lives.

Story was once tales told at every flickering fireside, the children's faces upturned and wide-eyed. Now it is expressed in many forms of art and culture, in business and activism.

In cultures worldwide, storytellers acquired special status, for they had something to say about how the world can be transformed. They took, in the telling, the audience temporarily away from the concerns and worries of the day.

The storytellers were called scald and poet, shaman and jester, enchanter and soothsayer, cunning women and men, cantor and conteuse, pied piper and every kind of trickster. You would find story being told by blind bard and bhat, barefoot friar and mendicant, the wayang kulit puppet master, snake-charmer with a rope and khöömei throat-singers from the steppe, dzikr trance-spinners all in white and the oak-leaved rhymers of the green lanes. And in recent times, pilgrim and ranger, barber-shop quartet, city busker and balladeer, podcaster and verse monger, novelist and stand-up comedian.

Their magic is always this: the more they talk, the more that people want to listen. Their themes are simple: to bring people together, to tell them something new, to reveal patterns and emotions that we the audience recognise as our own.

When stories are told, we learn something true about the world, about our inner selves too. Through story, we can practice for life itself.

Good stories carry useful information about what to do and not do. They are rehearsal without the reality of physical and social dangers. They guide us, offer paths out of tight spots, or indeed ways to avoid them in the first place. Story was the first virtual reality, it vastly increased our experience of the world without the risk.

And yet, story is today often characterised by antonyms. Children are chided for telling tales, myth is taken to be synonymous for a lie, a story itself is assumed to be a fabrication, a fiction not containing elements of truth. Imagination is needed for story, and yet someone might be told, as a put-down, you're imagining things. On the other hand, a sports star or actor might be called a legend, and when something wonderful happens, a romance or a splendid holiday, we might say it was just like a fairy tale.

The modern era prefers data and blueprint, certainty and mission statement. All good story, by contrast, is built on moments and events of transformation. So too our lives, and these sudden shifts in phase are often demanding. Acquiring habits and fixed action patterns that automate certain behaviours and thoughts is part of what makes us human.

But habits are hard to learn, and doubly hard to let go. They take effort and energy, but once acquired are deployed without thought. This frees up brain estate for other activities. Learning to walk takes months as an infant, learning to talk years. Riding a bike is scary, as is the first time you drive, then suddenly these habit patterns are automated and now require little explicit attention.

Story offers clues about the big changes we and our organisations have to face in life, what

happens when things around us shift, when we find ourselves clueless. We advance to small school, to big school, get a first job, lose a job, have a child. We unexpectedly have to care for a sick relative, a friend dies suddenly, we retire, and suddenly the end itself approaches fast.

Story is about these sequences of crossings to a new state, about transformation itself. This was once called alchemy. Ovid wrote 250 myths about transformations in the *Metamorphoses* poems two thousand years ago. Children were transformed into trees and animals, people into spirits. You sprinkle your face with water, and sprout antlers. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the oldest surviving written story, and is also about transformations: the establishment of the first city state by foragers and hunters, the search for answers in the wild, a great flood, the descent to the underworld of scorpion men and reed boats. The shadows of the underworld are hot and silent, there are no birds and animals there.

Robert Bly observes, “The wisdom of ancients hints that the old people know more than we do,” both always and especially now.

One of the greatest storytellers was Sheherazade. She nightly tells a different story for One Thousand and One Arabian nights, building one by one on consecutive dusks so that she and her sister can survive the cruel king. “I will begin with a story,” she says, when the stakes are life-threatening.

In folk-fairy tales, a human soul arrives as a frog, the audience is kept in thrall by the possibility the king may go back to being a farmer, or gold become copper. A plain goose lays golden eggs, a white cat wins a kingdom, a blusterer is found out, a hundred foxes learn to live in the city.

There is a knock on the door, long after dark. Oh no, what now? A pebble strikes your window at midnight! What next? Your world is about to change.

Today, ice turns to water, summers to fire, gentle rain to storm, the healed to broken. How about too, passivity to hope, bitter to sweet, fear to courage?

Story tells us all about these things. It contains instruction and moral guidance, it sets out the differences between right and wrong. We learn clues from these rehearsals in safe surroundings, among friends. Eventually we have to set out on our own and cross thresholds. At least we are not entirely in the dark.

The famed Navajo-Diné storyteller, Yellowman, said to Barre Toelken in the late 1960s:

“If children hear stories, they will grow up to be good people;
If adults hear stories, they will know what to do.”

There is sneaky logic in old tales, story being a form of medicine. Clarissa Estés, an *estadora* keeper of the stories, wrote, “When a fairy tale is told, it becomes right.”

The telling of tales, she said, causes a starry sky and a white moon to creep over the earth.

Great moments in a story stay with you forever.

2. Bad Story, or Not Story at All

Despite the cultural ubiquity of story, in a rational, technocratic context it can appear unhelpful, even the opposite of a truth. In contemporary times, story is often assumed to misinform.

Some might say a bad story is simply content with which the listener disagrees. But bad story is simpler than this: it is something that does not engage the audience.

Bad story is often exposition heavy. It deploys a “tell” mode, a transfer from one person or organisation to another without seeking or allowing amendment. Bad story commonly centres on offering solutions fixed in advance, pre-cooked as the work has been already done. It is thus all-about-us (the organisation or ourselves).

In bad story, there is no co-production. The audience is taken to be only in recipient mode. The audience will hear certain things, if favourably disposed to listen, but there is no need to get them creatively involved. Bad story assumes that a form of perfection is possible, and thus admits neither vulnerability nor space for alteration.

Everyone, every organisation, is flawed and vulnerable. So how did they overcome these adversities and difficulties? That’s something we’d like to know.

One of the first recorded analysts of story was said to be Aristotle, and he wrote that the primary aim of story was persuasion, saying it should contain ethos (character), logos (rational appeal), and pathos (emotion). This idea that story is used to persuade is alive today, finding expression in corporate brands and advertising, and in populist politics. The intention is to communicate to sell, and to offer simple solutions to complex problems.

Bad story simply seeks to persuade. Bad storytellers do not admit uncertainty, for they have worked hard to create perfection. Nothing needs to be added.

Such forms of bad story come from the featureless Flatlands: they are dull, easily flooded, and have flat characters who do not develop. Good story looks like it’s from the Cloud-Mountains: it has mystery, aspects are hidden. It works on the inner worlds of the audience.

Good story contains an outrageous suggestion. We’re lucky to be here, at this very moment. Even with all the global crises.

3. Story Regenerates, It’s Not Just Telling

We speak of “story-telling” and “story-tellers.” Yet a good story does not just only tell. It engages and evokes, it connects with the audience, it creates meaning and conjures up emotion. It creates a sense of flow. It uses the language of metaphor, of picture and place. It ignites imagination, it makes people and places come alive.

In story, we start as strangers, and at the end the audience is closer to each other and to the storyteller. We create a larger us and a longer now. Good story lasts generations. It creates an abundance of time.

Good stories hold the world together, create a wide roof where all paths rejoin. They open up the future, saying this journey of our lives never ends. We do not arrive at something fixed or stable. In the political context, story creates choices, it offers new ideas to an audience, and says: you choose.

The power of story also comes in part because it is immersive. It creates a sense of flow in the reader and audience, a period when the anxieties of life retreat. We become lost, in a good way. We feel good. Story then sneaks in some kind of guidance for living. After the flow, story can help to

jolt us out of existing habits.

Story today takes many forms, and these are both agent for communication and platform for action. It seeks through engagement to change the audience. It transfers something with meaning and moral content, and so helps the audience transform something in their own lives on their own terms.

Story thus creates connections, as it lowers the emotional distance between people. It creates energy and life; story is regenerative. It heals and cures. It is negentropic (reverses entropy), as is life itself. Story offers new choices to the audience. A connecting story can stay with you all your life. The tale of the ash-girl, the one who lives in the cinders of the fireplace, has spread and survived more than a thousand years from origins in T'ang China. There are now seven hundred recorded different language versions of Cinderella. It's perhaps the most popular story in the world.

Kurt Vonnegut says, this is story: Human falls in a hole, gets out. Or starts in a hole, gets out. Maybe falls in another one. He says of Cinderella starting in a hole, "People love that story. They never get sick of it."

This is the thing about such fairy-tales: they're comprehensive to children. They don't need explaining.

Good story opens a portal to a new hinterland. It is a crossing point from ordinary-world to special-world. It creates space and time, it helps foster innovation and break habits. Such story creates a larger life. It takes a problem into a wide meadow, where it looks different now that there are mountains in the distance, here by the bubbling stream and the bees thrumming in the flowers.

You're living at the bottom of the hill, where you've always lived. Now what?

Good story changes people, including the storyteller or their organisation. It contains a "call-to-action."

Good story has impact, it is sacred.

4. How Story Can Be Used to Tackle Contemporary Crises

We are in the dark, have no idea what will happen next.

A wise trickster character appears before the hero-heroine, acting as a threshold guardian, suggesting they must get in a new game.

We are reluctant at first, yet do decide to go, for this is going to be our story. The journey starts, adventures and uncertainty follow. There are antagonists far stronger than us, forms of monster and corporate devil, yet the challenges to overcome seem more internal than external. There's an elixir to find, and then the perilous journey home.

These days, we find ourselves in the midst of world-spanning crises of climate, nature and social inequality. All three have the same proximate causes: a type of economy that promotes too much material consumption and a dangerous reliance on fossil fuels. Something is about to change. Yet we have never been here before. We are in the dark forest, at our darkest hour, and there doesn't even seem to be a path.

Adult fears, after all, create the mood of being lost in the forest.

What kinds of language and values might we use to find our ways out of this pickle? Berthold Brecht wrote in 1939:

“In the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing, about the dark times.”

These crises signal a need for new forms of story-telling, combined with a language of kindness and generosity. Kindness is both a common human state and a fine response to threat. It is selfishness that is the outlier.

An ancient mariner, seventy years crew and famed skipper of the drifters and trawlers from the east coast of England, once said to me, “You know, in those days when we had the fishing, there was more kindness and generosity here, we travelled over the sea to other ports and seaside places, and came back with gifts and stories” (*Sea Sagas of the North*, 2022). The ecological collapse of fisheries then led directly to social and cultural change on the coasts, and people lost their friendships with others like them across the North Sea and eastern North Atlantic. The norms of gift and story exchange were lost, and coastal communities changed for the worse.

A trickster on the road offers a choice: “A big piece of cake with my curse, or a small piece with my blessing.” The choice is ours.

The Jack cycle of stories originates in Britain, published first in a chapbook three hundred years ago. The boy is persuaded to swap Milky White their cow for beans. It doesn’t go well, his mother sends him to bed with no supper. He wakes up to a bedroom looking different, dark and shady, a kind of green colour. Outside the beanstalk is a ladder to a new world, where there are big people called giants, just like adults who have all the money and gold and stamp around, eating the souls and bodies of small people like him. He beats the giant.

What is a good story? One that lasts, says Janet Yolen.

Now we need stories of hope, and then to find a way to use these to create greater and more effective agency to address the great crises of these times. Story creates this larger and wider tent. It lets people come inside, even those who disagree. Rebecca Solnit in *Hope in the Dark* has observed, look not for hope in the limelight, but in the flickering shadows and margins. Hope is located in uncertainty, we do not know what will happen and so our actions matter. When you act with hope, you soon find others: hope helps us move from the individual to the collective.

Volodymyr Zelensky recently said, “Laughter is fatal to the men of marble.” Elsewhere a vice-presidential candidate calls the opposition weird, and everyone laughs. These phrases slip something past the guards, especially of dictator types.

In the 1980s in Poland, people put their TVs in prams, and took to pushing them around the streets, creating common cause against media control yet without saying a word.

People of the Baltic states were pretty fed up too. There were no immediate prospects of change.

In Estonia, a singing revolution started when small groups of people in public places began to sing songs. The gatherings grew, and the singing spread. Authorities could do nothing, for people were simply singing and laughing. In August 1989, two million people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania formed a human wall 650 kilometres long. They linked hands. And sang.

The concrete wall that Erich Honecker, leader of East Germany, said would “stand in fifty years, and in a hundred years too,” fell that November.

In the folk-fairy tale of the Six Swans, the youngest sister is forced to remain silent for six years as she sews and sews. She grieves and can’t pray or sing or dance, she sews shirts of starwort to break the spell over her six brothers. At the end, she comes out of this lonely life of interior ecology regenerated, and transforms her brothers too.

There comes a moment when hope and voice might return. We might now find we have time to be amazed by the cherry blossoms on the far hill, the blaze of bluebells in the wood, and then work together to care for them.

There might be heresy going on, but then again, it’s only story and laughter.

5. Story Structure and Intent

All story conforms to a Three-Act structure: it has a before and a beyond, and an arc of subsong running underneath (Figure 1). This is the story of transformation.

You come in late, avoiding exposition, and leave early, allowing the audience to fill in the spaces for the future.

There is always a before. Just don’t begin with it. Exposition kills story. Story does not begin on page one or in the first reel. It began long before.

You begin with “once upon a time”, in a particular place and micro-season, actions and events occur, and then there is a promise beyond of an “ever after.” All that came before is the great roar of eternity, all that comes in the future will go on along many possible paths, getting better we hope. Living happily ever after does not suggest eternal life. It just takes the story out of previously narrow confines and hopes.

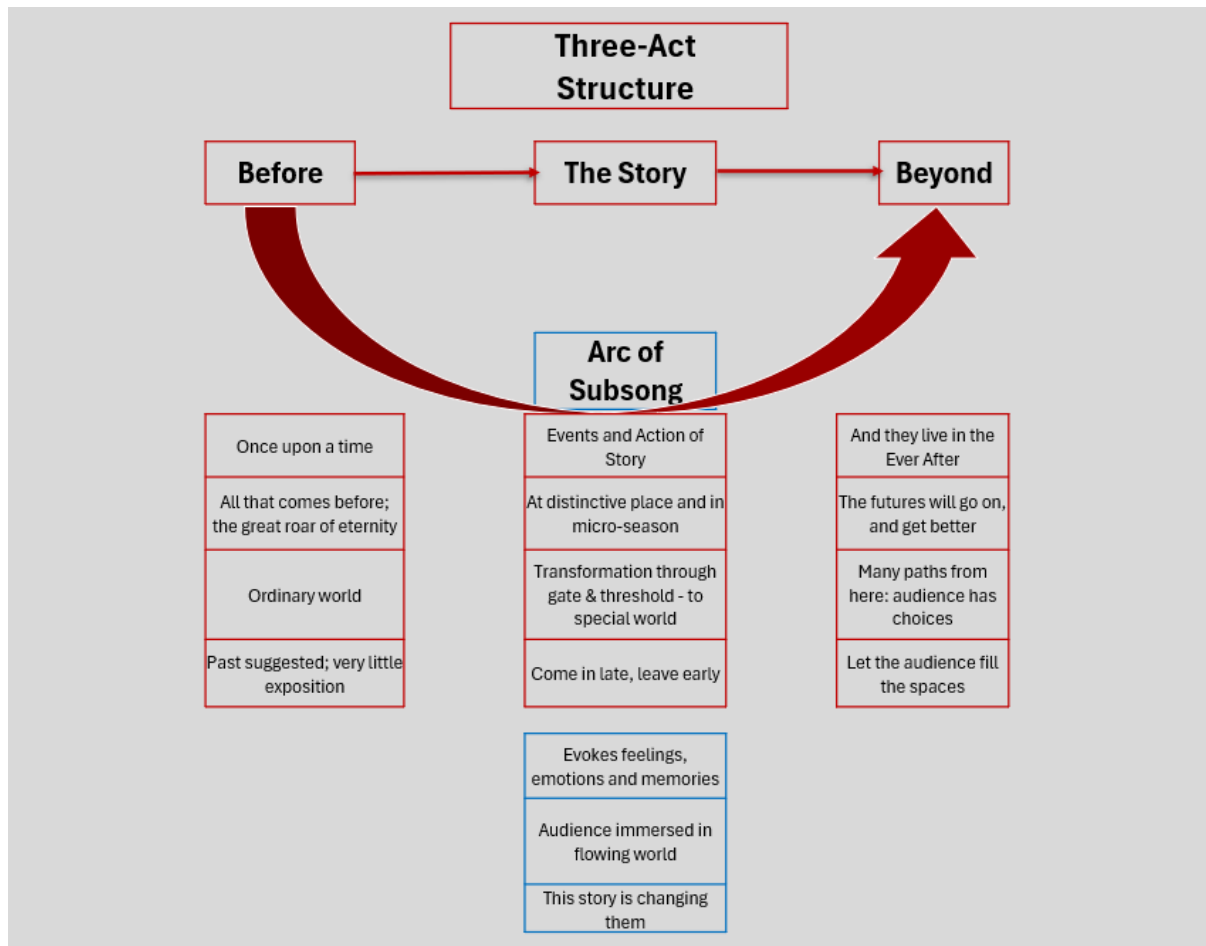
Underneath it all, though, is the bit that connects the audience and reader to the tale. The arc of subsong contains the feelings, emotions and memories evoked. It is the sense of immersion, of being lost in this world, in a nice way. It is the story that changes us (as we write, as we tell, as we listen). The subsong is the river under the way.

But all of this will only happen if story centres on transformation. Story can disrupt behaviours that are stuck in a loop.

Did you have a day you wished would go on forever? One that somehow also made you unhappy because you knew it would end? This is the complex territory of the subsong.

Often story is about what is not said. Something important is about to happen, wrote Han Kang. “For god’s sake, don’t die. I didn’t mention any of this,” she said, “I spoke of my pet dog.”

Not all story connects with audiences. Many institutions think they are creating stories, but find it easiest to revert to “telling” mode. Yet the narrative arcs of good story have infinite possible outcomes. Flap your wings, and all sorts of distant things can happen.



Here, then, is a simple typology, based on the acronym TACT: Tell – Ask – Co-Produce – Transform (see Table 1). All story is created by a teller and a listener, by writers and readers by film-makers and viewers. It is the connection with audience that matters most.

Maya Angelou wrote, “We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.”

The actor Robin Williams once said: “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always.”

Italo Calvino recalled a Tuscan proverb: “A tale is not beautiful if nothing is added.”

So try, too, to leave out the parts that the audience skips. Or falls asleep in.

Table 1. A Typology of Story: “TACT”

Types of Story	Aims and Mode	Components
T: Tell	Tells the audience, tries to persuade.	<p>Seeks to persuade mostly with data and rational argument.</p> <p>Tell mode is unidirectional: fixed information is pushed outwards from speaker or organisation to recipient.</p> <p>The telling person or organisation is not listening, so misses any feedback.</p>
A: Ask	Asks pre-formed questions, and expecting just binary yes/no answers.	<p>Consultative process, useful for gathering data on existing opinions or behaviours.</p> <p>The audience rarely engaged in design or analysis, does not come to talk about what is an improvement to them.</p>
C: Co-Produce	Working jointly to create new options and outcomes.	<p>Learning methods bring different knowledge bases together.</p> <p>Story creates empathy, values everyone equally. The audience recognises themselves in the story. Creative, novel solutions emerge.</p>
T: Transform	Story and engagement are used to transform lives and create better futures.	<p>Story is used to create empathy, hope and togetherness: the promise of better things in future.</p> <p>The process is regenerative: it creates life and meaning.</p> <p>The process welcomes uncertainty.</p>

6. How Story Can Help Organisations

Organisations often find themselves facing their own crises, sometimes existential. A competitor arrives unannounced in the market, a policy changes, key staff leave, energy costs spiral, a media event hits the news, the pandemic dramatically cuts income. Someone says new rules and principles have to be adopted, and yet no one has any experience to draw upon. You’re in a tight spot, so what now?

Organisations have their tried and tested ways of talking about themselves: foundation myths, measures of success, mission statements, brand architecture and tales of enemy competitors. Yet these are not stories.

An organisation creates worthy websites and publishes reports full of explanation and exposition. It seeks to communicate information. Yet these inspire no heroic journeys. We don’t want to hear a company’s origin story, nor a list of their own self-defined successes.

Stories should not explain. They should serve to inspire.

But for the organisation, this often feels risky, especially opening up to the knowledge and views of their audience of consumers. When the toy company, Lego, made the chance discovery of a somewhat shy group of customers called Adult Fans of Lego, it listened and engaged, gave them status as creators, and dramatically increased sales. When NASA launched a worldwide citizen

science platform, it found that problems previously taking five years to solve were now solved in six months. But this did not persuade all its own staff: half vigorously opposed the involvement of these external amateurs.

Story is rarely about data, evidence, sales figures and graphs. There is a place for these, but it is not in story. Story is about the challenges we face. It contains emotions and behaviours people recognise and value. Good stories are always about engagement with the public: audiences, readers, listeners, members and customers. An organisation succeeds when it tells a story not about itself, but how it is helping people make the world a better place.

Emotions change behaviours, data does not.

The organisation talks about how it is improving lives. The listener recognises this, and turns toward the organisation.

Such an organisation using story can be small or large. It does not talk of its brilliant basics, the things it does well in the background. It focuses on being compellingly different. It might end up being a game-changer, shifting whole sectors. Small fish can eat big fish with good stories.

Any organisation can tell a good story. Most do not. They think everyone cares about their business, but they don't. Really, nobody cares.

The public is interested in what you can do for them.

They say: tell me something good. And please, not more doom.

7. How Story Can Create Better Policy Outcomes

The tell mode of story creates pre-baked themes and solutions, and reinforces a sense amongst the public that organisations and policy makers are not listening. This tell mode also tends to focus on single solutions, where choices are not offered. The public have to take it or leave it. This can be fatal for policy.

In addressing the world-spanning crises of climate and nature loss, *Response Diversity* is essential for creating mass actions of change. When people feel coerced into adoption of single options, they may obey if the idea happens to be good, or just not worth opposing. But often approval is grudging.

Story stops people's saying no. Response diversity allows people to get in the game, even if they don't agree with every bit. And this, in the first place, requires acts of radical imagination.

Good stories do not advise you what to do. The audience can work it out, including small children hearing fairy-folk tales.

Some forms of discussion about climate change elicit low engagement, because factual information increases resistance amongst some groups. People don't like being told what to do or think. It has become evident that tales of collapse and days of doom are self-defeating. They reduce agency, the sense that action can produce good outcomes.

It is clear that response diversity will be key to preventing the emergence of backlash movements, the loss from the public sphere of credible options to aid transitions, and the growth of a new climate or green authoritarianism.

The sound of certainty is a killer of story. Especially if the speaker is implying they're cleverer than the listener.

It's self-defeating to say, this crisis is so bad you the public audience must just accept what we experts say, and so do what they're told.

Policy options centred around storytelling and hope can instead help create diverse public responses and creative institutional frameworks. Good story is co-produced. It leads to many ideas, some of which are novel to some actors. It leads to response diversity. Options are co-produced with the public so that they do not feel forced into actions they do not yet support.

But this still hard for policy makers and their organisations. Story plays a central role in human social and political life, yet features only peripherally in policy making. Policy tends to like to use tools with predictable responses.

Good story can lead to tipping points and phase transitions, where transformations can be as sudden as those we experience in life. Story is a world of non-linear dynamics. Someone can be both lucky and unlucky in story. A butterfly flaps its wings, and whole systems change.

A challenge, then: can we create stories so vivid, so astounding and so colourful, that they will be remembered for a thousand years?

In Franz Kafka's *Before the Law*, the supplicant sits by the door for days, for months, for years, waiting for the call, for the door to open. When old and dying, he whispers to the door keeper about the unfairness of it all. The door keeper says, "Oh, this is your door, you could have gone through it at any moment."

Story says this: go through the door.

For in story, everything is at stake.



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