

## “THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF EVERY SUCCESSFUL STORY”

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# Reflections

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At the center of every culture is a group of people seated around a fire telling tales of the heroes whose struggles transformed and remade their world. That's true whether the fire is the burning embers of a cooking fire in the Amazon basin or the flickering pixels of a cathode ray tube in upper Manhattan. It's true whether the hero is White Buffalo Calf Woman, whose gift of the sacred pipe gave birth to the Sioux nation, or Neal Armstrong, whose view of the world from the moon ushered in an era of globalization. These stories do more than define a culture; they shape and move it, making it a living thing. As author Daniel Quinn has said, “The carrier of culture is the story we tell ourselves over and over” (Quinn, 1995).

As human beings, we communicate primarily through the telling of stories. We are bombarded by hundreds of stories each day—stories about which toothpaste is best, about terrorists lurking in the shadows, about new scientific miracles and eternal spiritual truths. We hear so many stories that it is hard to study story as story itself. We are like fish trying to see water. What we need is a good definition of what a story is.

The definition I find best is: *A story is a fact wrapped in an emotion that can compel us to take action and so transform the world around us.*

This definition holds true as far back in the study of story as we can go. Jerome Bruner, the father of cognitive psychology, believes that storytelling is hard-wired into our psyches. Bruner has observed that, from an early age, children tell stories. First are the stories of completion. The young child says (by means of gesture and facial expression), “All gone,” when the bottle is empty. The child says, “Uh oh,” when she feels she has made a mistake and, “Ohh!” when surprised or pleased.

These stories are short but complete. And they meet our definition. Take “all gone.” The fact is that the bottle is finished. This fact is wrapped in an emotion, either satisfaction or desire for more. Depending on which emotion it is, an adult is compelled to take an action—either to burp the baby and settle her down, or to get another bottle. Either way, the baby's world is transformed for the better. Bruner asserts that infants develop meaning through narrative, and that the need to create stories precedes language. He suggests that infants are motivated to learn to speak precisely because they already have stories inside them that they want to share with others (Bruner, 1990).

Not all stories end happily. Living in Germany in the aftermath of World War I was frightening and brutal. Hitler wrapped that fact in the powerful emotions of paranoia and anti-Semitism. How powerfully he conveyed those emotions can be seen in the surviving

films of his speeches. The story he told—that the Jews were responsible—compelled the German people to take actions that transformed the world into a living hell. Though story telling is innate in human beings, it is a value-free process.

Story as story is neutral. As corporate executives, scientists, and academics committed to moving our culture toward the common good, we must understand how to use the incredible power of story to communicate sometimes unpleasant but important facts, such as global warming or income disparities, in human terms, so that our culture takes actions to change our world for the better.

What makes a good story? What makes a story great? Why do some stories have a life of only a few news cycles, while others come to dominate our cultural debate? What gives a story staying power at the box office or in the boss's office? Having spent my professional life intimately involved with stories as an actor, communications coach, and corporate consultant in intra-corporate communication and branding, I have come to observe that all successful stories have four basic components.

To make them easy to remember I call these components PHAT: passion, hero, antagonist, and transformation. These components lie within any story, whether a movie, a business presentation, or a political debate. When these components are understood and used effectively, stories speak to our basic human condition and needs. Because these narrative needs are hard-wired into us almost from birth, stories written 5,000 years ago in languages long dead can still speak to us.

Before we go further, we should return to the very basics.

Pythagoras was probably the first great systems thinker in our Western culture. But because none of his writing is available in its original form, our study of story components begins with his student, the philosopher and poet Empedocles. From Empedocles, we first get the concept of the world made up of four elements: fire, earth, air, and water. Until recently, conventional wisdom viewed Empedocles as a natural philosopher—in essence a proto-scientist—primarily trying to describe the material world. More recent

scholarship (by Hadot, 2000; Kingsley, 1995; and others) has shown that the four elements of Empedocles were not solely material but also described inner psychological states. Empedocles attributed divinity to these elements because he saw them as partaking of the eternal nature of consciousness itself and called them “the four roots” because he saw them as the basis of life.

In that archetypal psychological sense, Empedocles' elements relate to our understanding of story. Those interested in pursuing this view of the pre-socratics are referred to the more recent works of philosopher Oscar Ichazo (available online at [arica.org](http://arica.org)).

How do the archetypal elements of Empedocles relate to the narrative elements of PHAT? Since story is the carrier of culture, and Empedocles' elements lie at the core of ours, it is not surprising that there is a direct correlation. Using the elements as an anchor allows us to deal with story structure in a less linear fashion.

Once again, the key I use is PHAT: passion, hero, antagonist, and transformation.

### **Passion**

Every powerful narrative has passion, the emotion that is wrapped around our story's central fact. This corresponds to Empedocles' fire. Passion that ignites the story in the heart of the audience. When an audience first comes to a story, it is far from being a unified body. It is composed of separate individuals with differing needs, desires, and distractions.

Theater people often call a new or difficult audience “cold.” They understand that the audience must be “warmed up” before it can absorb new material.

Passion is the fire that attracts the audience's attention and draws it into the story. It makes us want to hear more. Passion is the sword that cuts away the excess baggage of past thought and images and calls our attention to the present. It unifies us as an audience. And in that unity, which both transcends our self and reinforces it, there is tremendous strength. We turn on the TV every night even when there is nothing really good on, just to be part of the story.

Every significant social and political movement must have passion to exist. In my workshops, I often ask people to describe the most powerful public event they

ever attended. A few years ago, a friend described being at the August 1963 peaceful civil rights march on Washington and hearing Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. If you have a moment, you might want to read that speech again. It is storytelling at its absolute finest. My friend recalled that as she stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial in a crowd of more than 1 million people, the passionate heartfelt words and images of King's story washed over her, and all the people around her seemed to disappear. "It was as if he were talking directly to me," she said.

That is what passion does. It makes the story personal. It makes us care.

### **Hero**

All the passion in the world won't do any good unless you have someplace to put it. That is where the hero comes in. The hero relates to Empedocles' element of earth. It is the way the story is grounded in our reality. By hero, I don't mean Superman or a grandmother who rushes into a burning building to save a baby, though these are examples of heroes, but the character in the story who gives the audience a point of view.

This point of view needs to be substantial enough that the story has "a leg to stand on," but of a scale that allows us to identify with it. The hero is both our surrogate and our guide through the narrative. The hero's vision of the world creates the landscape the audience enters.

For the audience to identify with the hero's point of view, they must feel a little piece of themselves in the hero's situation, so part of the hero's function is to create a sense of equality with the audience. If the hero is too perfect, the audience rapidly loses interest. Good stories have heroes who are human and authentic.

Whatever you think of Ronald Reagan's politics, he was a great storyteller. He knew the importance of heroes in creating a political consensus. He understood that with the right hero, people would see even dry and technical facts from a personal viewpoint. During his State of the Union addresses, when he got to a point that might be abstract or an issue that might be divisive, he would point up to the Congressional Gallery and there, posed and waiting, was an "American Hero" who personified the point Reagan was trying to make. Reagan controlled the

national debate by using heroes to define the territory it would cover.

One of the most important characteristics of the hero is that without him or her there can be no action. In David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, there is a wonderful scene in which Prince Feisal (played by Alec Guinness) asks an American reporter why he has come all the way to the Arabian Desert. The reporter replies that he believes it is time for America to become involved in the war against Germany, and it is his job to make a hero out of Lawrence. The reporter knew America would take action only if the issue had a human face.

### **Antagonist**

For a story, problems are like air. They breathe life into the narrative. If no obstacles appear, the audience views the story as flat. It's seen merely as propaganda or a public relations puff piece. Dealing with the antagonist creates an atmosphere, which makes the story interesting and credible. In fact, the antagonist is the first thing we think of when we think of a story.

The Dalai Lama says, "Each one of us has an innate desire to seek happiness and overcome suffering" (1998). Great stories mirror this reality. Seeking happiness is the motivation. Overcoming suffering is doing battle with the antagonist. Instinctively, humans are interested in how others deal with their problems. Funneling this curiosity into the narrative deepens the audience's attention and drives the story forward.

A great problem, often personified as an identifiable villain, crystallizes the facts of the story and helps them come alive. A powerful antagonist is central to most great stories and gives the action of hero (and by extension, the audience) direction and focus. It is very hard to find that focus without a good villain. Two-time Academy Award winner William Goldman says that every screenplay has to answer just three questions: "Who is your hero? What does he want? Who the hell is keeping him from getting it?" (1986).

The creative potential of the antagonist to inspire action can be seen in the still-unfolding Enron scandal. At first, the Enron story is just a set of facts. It's the largest bankruptcy in corporate history, but not all that different from other enormous financial disasters, and as such restricted to the business sections of your

local paper. The press gives us a point of view by discovering the story's heroes, all the hard-working Enron employees who, through no fault of their own, are having their life savings wiped out. But we still don't know what to do about it.

What action should we take? That becomes clear only when the villain comes on stage in the form of Kenneth Lay, the man who not only destroyed the heroes' wealth, but made a pretty penny doing it. Suddenly, we can take action. A bill to promote corporate responsibility passes Congress and things change. How much they will change is another story. The point is that, without an antagonist, our actions might have remained unfocused and unproductive.

Of course, there is a moral danger in creating an antagonist. We don't want to demonize our opponents. So it is important to remember that purpose of the antagonist is not to create conflict, but to help clarify it.

Lockheed's "Skunk Works" is one of the world's premier aircraft design firms. It has developed many of the finest US military aircraft over the past 60 years. Their slogan is, "It takes a great enemy to make a great airplane." What Skunk Works understands is that in a good corporate story (and it is the corporate story that defines the corporate culture), conflict or struggle with an enemy is far from destructive. It can create a positive atmosphere for innovation by making it important to maximize effort. It helps unify the team to move forward toward a common goal. What makes the story positive or negative is the nature of that goal.

### **Transformation**

Transformation is the natural result of a well-told story. Our heroes take action to overcome their problems, and they and the world around them are changed. The element that relates to transformation is, of course, water. Water is the most transformable of all the elements. Place it in a container, and it conforms to that new shape. Though it is soft to the touch, it can also cut through limestone and granite, carving rivers and valleys into the landscape. It is in the waters of the ocean that the greatest transformation of all first occurred, the miracle of life.

The audience feels satisfied when they see the hero emerge from the fires of hell a changed and better

human being. Learning from the negative and moving on toward the good gives us all hope. Achilles begins *The Iliad* in a snit, refusing his duties to his comrades in arms, but ends the story defeating his enemy Hector and honoring his fallen foe in death. Hamlet dithers in a world of moral ambiguity, but in the end takes actions that remove a great evil from the heart of his kingdom. Luke Skywalker accepts the reality of The Force and gives the republic new hope.

These stories don't have to have a happy ending. The last scene of Hamlet is hardly a laugh riot. But they do all follow a common arc. We want our heroes to break from the bondage of their past and generate a more vital future. When the hero moves from selfish to selfless, this mirrors the hidden potential in each of us. We embrace those stories and make them our own.

After emerging from a long prison confinement, Nelson Mandela expressed no bitterness or hatred toward his captors. Instead he exuded wisdom and compassion, and that began to move South Africa away from its bloody past. The very forces that had tried for so long to destroy him had transformed Mandela. The whole world could understand his story. How could they not? Joseph Campbell has said, "When we stop thinking primarily of ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness" (1948).

### **Using the Four Elements**

Once the four elemental components of the PHAT model are understood, their use in the analysis of story is relatively straightforward. If you want to know whether a story you plan to use in a political or media campaign will be successful, you should ask four questions:

1. **Passion.** Does the story contain sufficient passion to engage the emotions of its target audience? Are the stakes high enough? The emotions of a story act as its primary anchor in memory and its motivation to action (which could be at the point of purchase or in the ballot box).
2. **Hero.** Does the story provide a clearly defined point of view? Can the facts that lie at its core be

understood? Can this point of view be comfortably accepted by the target audience?

3. **Antagonist.** Are the obstacles that confront the hero of the story (and by extension, the audience) expressed clearly so that the actions needed to overcome those obstacles are understood and the challenge of taking such actions fully accepted?
4. **Transformation.** Does the story have the power to change the life of the audience in a meaningful way, and is that transformation positive?

If the answer to these four questions is *yes*, then the story is likely to be successful. If not, then it won't be.

If your story is weaker in one area than in another, then work on the weak element. For example, you feel very powerful emotions about the scientific facts underlying global warming, and you know whom the bad guys are (we all do know, don't we), but you're not able to provide the audience with a point of view that allows them to feel comfortable accepting those facts. As a result, they find your story, well, science fiction. What your story needs is a good hero. A hero your audience can relate to and accept as authentic and whose problems mirror their own. It shouldn't be hard to find one. There are plenty of heroes out there, and once your story has a good one, it will be grounded in the experience of your audience and easily accepted and understood.

Or let's say you are giving a presentation to an interdepartmental meeting within your corporation. You've carefully marshaled your facts so each department can see what relates to their particular interests. You've laid out the steps needed to overcome the obstacles ahead. There is no doubt the overall result will be a positive transformation.

But you finish speaking and notice a distinct lack of interest in your audience. You think you may have even seen your boss stifle a yawn. Your problem may be that you haven't connected your passion to your presentation.

Remember, according to our definition of story, it is emotion that makes facts compel people to take

action. You need to ask yourself why you care about the project you are suggesting. What feelings does it bring up? If you find your own emotional anchor to the project—why you *want* to suggest it—and can be open and honest about those feelings without histrionics, that passion will transmit to your audience. At the very least, it will provoke a heated discussion of the topic. With passion, your presentation will fire your audience up, and that beats cold stares anytime.

Of course, storytelling is an art, and no one element of the PHAT paradigm can ever be considered in total isolation. For example, you might have problems connecting to the passion of a story because you really don't feel comfortable with the transformation it produces. Analyzing problems in corporate communication requires subtlety and experience, but the PHAT model and its grounding in the four elements of Empedocles is an excellent place to begin.

Because human beings have an innate ability to take in information and organize it in narrative form, and because shared stories are at the core of every culture, the key to changing a corporate culture lies in eliciting, understanding, and clarifying the stories on which it is based.

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