

Stories

1.

Stories. We are surrounded by them. Or rather, we surround ourselves with them.

There is something fascinating about how human mind lives on stories. How every scenario becomes in a way valid the moment you understand the concept, even if none of that happened.

We are born storytellers, surprisingly good at swiftly making sense of what is put in front of us. In fact, we are so apt to build narratives that we even grasp the reality through storytelling. We string beads of information, facts, ideas, values, and clues together on a thread of a story, so that it *sticks* better.

When saying *a story* I don't mean a fairytale, a legend or an epic poem, but something much wider than that. It might take a form of a narrative, but also a concept, a statement, or a belief. Creating stories is closely tied with our perception of the world around us, as well as how we see ourselves in it. They lay the foundation for a mechanism of our understanding of reality.

We have always been very curious about the world we live in, but since we never had the full picture and the knowledge needed to understand it, and we still don't, we would implement the snippets of information available to us at the moment into ideas, theories, beliefs. And so, both concepts of the Earth being flat and round existed in parallel for millennia, as none of them could be proven true. Astrology, theories, faith and philosophy progressed slowly hand in hand, feeding into one another - the Ptolemaic system of the universe coexisted with beliefs and thoughts of the ancient Greece just as well as with those of Christian church in the Middle Ages.

It happened only recently, during the Copernican Revolution, that scientific speculations drew away from faith, and the only way for Galileo to defend the heliocentric model from accusations of heresy without undermining religious dogmas, was to say that stories in the Bible were not to be taken literally.

When presented with less than the full picture, we attempt to (...) fill in missing information and form a complete image or idea based on common or easily recognizable patterns from our past experience and understanding.

And since we almost never have the full picture anyway, the [Gestalt] principle of closure is at the core of (...) our every effort to grasp the complexity of the world around us.

Andy Rutledge ¹

Seeing (...) establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it.

The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight. (...)

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.

John Berger ²

As science progressed, and new knowledge fed into fresh theories and speculations, about the Big Bang, black holes, the universe and the multiverse, it started playing larger and larger role in our view on the world, and there's something deceiving about it. It would be too much to say that science became a new religion, however, it somehow replaced the way we explain the world to ourselves.

We seem to forget that the nature of science is that each concept is only but temporary, provisional, and serves as the most accurate model of reality for the time being, not aspiring to be completely true. The words *myths* and *beliefs* are nowadays replaced by *hypothesis* and *interpretations*, but they're still merely believable, speculative. We might look at ancient Egyptians or Greeks with pity for their naivety, not thinking that in the future our trust in current theories will probably look just as unworldly.

What is it in human nature that has always made us lean on those explanations, theories, concepts - whether religious or scientific - so much?

Perhaps - although a lot of what we're convinced about to be true is in fact stories which might not have much to do with what the world actually is - they hold our perceived reality together, make us feel grounded and that we know what we stand on, literally. Whether they're true, and whether it will ever be possible to confirm what the truth is, are secondary problems.

In a way, we live in the perceived reality just as much as in the actual one, or maybe even more; or perhaps in something between the two.

Parallel universes may or may not exist; the case is unproved. We are going to have to live with that uncertainty.

Nothing is wrong with scientifically based philosophical speculation, which is what multiverse proposals are. But we should name it for what it is.

George Ellis ³

The cosmological principle (...) amounts to the strongly philosophical statement that the part of the universe which we can see is a fair sample, and that the same physical laws apply throughout.

In essence, this in a sense says that the universe is knowable and is playing fair with scientists.

William C. Keel ⁴

Lies are what the world lives on, and those who can face the challenge of a truth and build their lives to accord are finally not many, but the very few.

Joseph Campbell ⁵

The mind receives images of the world that it compares with existing stored images to produce a new composite image that is once again stored into memory.

Tenen ⁶

2.

One of the most important moments and decisions in my life, not surprisingly, came to me when I felt like I reached the bottom. When I achieved what I believed would make me happy and still found myself miserable. When the beliefs that had worked until that moment did not hold true anymore. The moment you realise that, there is no going back. You know there is something inside you that you can't run away from, and you finally listen to your mum or your close friend, or your partner saying 'try therapy'. And so I did.

As a person who had done over the years some digging in the topics of at first self-development, then mindfulness, and then a weird mixture of psychology, self-help and spirituality, I thought I got the gist of what ego is, of what *awakening* is, what *subconscious* is, but only seeing therapy at work made me understand what's actually going on there.

You see, it is not about confessing, reworking the situations, talking them through for the sake of talking. It's not about that at all. From each situation, with your therapist you dig out some old beliefs, scripts, preconceptions that influence, distort, even poison your view on all kinds of situations.

With time you grow to realise that what you do, what you think, what you believe you are, is to a large extent a product of your past. That you are stuck in repeating same patterns of behaviour, imposing old frames of thinking on present situations. As you progress in your healing journey, you discern what the real work is about - unrooting, unclogging, unlearning, setting yourself free from the limitations put on you by your environment, your life experience, and yourself.

We all imprison ourselves into a tunnel vision that keeps us away from reaching who we could be if not for all that has happened to us, all that has shaped us. I believe that as you shed off the layers of old habits, patterns, beliefs, and stories, you become more and more of yourself.

Now
Rise
Begin
Time to awaken and
Ask
Why?
And when?
Don't hide from the questions that rise
Deep
Within
I can't go 'round again

Now
Hear
Be still
Let go of the things that I
Thought
Were
Real
The veil slipped and now I can see

Willow Smith, Jahnavi Harrison ⁷

As a therapist, I've so often tried to put a wedge between what happened to a person and who they think they are, their reductive and restrictive story.

It seems impossible at times to believe, but is true, that what happened to us is what happened out there.

What happened out there is not who we are. And what happened was usually never about us, it was about someone else's problems, someone else's limitations.

James Hollis ⁸

But what are those? Where do they come from in the first place and why are they so hard to overcome?

Both concepts of the inner child and the ego base on the idea that a part of your psyche assembles a personal agenda, or a narrative about yourself, to build a sense of identity, and this feeling that when you wake up in the morning you're the same person you were yesterday. Of course, this mechanism feeds on life experiences, uses external events and your responses to them as material for intricate set of beliefs, definitions and statements, giving you the sense of self - 'I am...', 'I like...', 'I feel guilty when...', 'I get annoyed when...'.

This powerful construct - although immensely useful, and necessary to piece together all the moments of your existence into one story - is at the same time constrictive, limiting, and traps you in a habitual character of life. Unconsciously, we keep reaching for old psychological resources and project them on each other. At the same time, we live in the present as much as in the past, without knowing. We constantly confirm ourselves in the familiar ways of being.

There is a big gap between who we think we are and who we actually are. A tension between self-imposed limitations and the real potential. As we try to define ourselves in narratives, we cling to an illusion that we actually are definable - that our intellect can grasp our nature.

How much more scary would be living in uncertainty that you don't know who you are, that you can't really understand yourself, and that you can't depend on a predictable structure of thought patterns and reactive behaviours?

How responsible, accountable, flexible would you have to be? How much more in tune with the moment and your actual pure, present emotions, untainted by your past?

Every human has an ego, a part of the mind that holds the identity of who we are, who we believe others are, and what we believe about the world around us.

The ego is the 'voice within your head' that is attempting to make sense of our human experience. This voice is actually not your own, it's the internalised voice of those closest to us from birth to age 7.

Dr Nicole LePera ⁹

Because our well-being is tied to understanding, we begin to story our world. (...) We make a story an active process.

Our stories are our provisional interpretations of what is going on and what it might mean to us. These provisional narratives are allied with emotions within us, embodied in a somatic registry which never forgets.

James Hollis ⁸

3.

Stories are in an interesting way closely related to our world, but not completely bound or attached to it. They touch on it ever so slightly, but keep themselves to their own realm - intangible, insubstantial, invisible. Otherworldly.

They seem to remain in a nonphysical dimension of human imagination, but there's something very real about them. If they speak to us all, they must exist in some sense, right? Just where are they on the spectrum between existence and non-existence? How do they relate to reality? Do they help us grasp it or do they blind us to it? Just how much of the world we perceive is the actual realm, and how much of it is stories?

Think about speculative architectural visions like *The Walking City* by Archigram, Etienne-Louis Boullée's *Cenotaph for Newton*, *La Città Nuova* by Antonio Sant'Elia, *Plan Voisin* by Le Corbusier, *Broadacre City* by Frank Lloyd Wright...

Something about them feels almost tangible. Even though never realised, they undoubtedly had a significant impact on the history of architecture, and on how our cities shaped and developed.

The load of potential scenarios, and of what could be floods one's mind when looking at them. Their strength lays in the fact the they don't aim at tricking the eye, they don't pretend to look real, but clearly bring a provisional representation of something that could become real at some point, and leave plenty of space for imagination. They don't quite belong to our world, but the moment you look at them it feels as if they existed or will exist somewhere at some point.

Plato made a very simple distinction between the physical world of senses and the invisible world of reason in his allegory of the divided line. He believed that one can't truly grasp reality with mere senses which prove limited and flawed, and that there is another aspect of reality, just as real, comprehensible by intellect - the world of ideas.

They say the Greek artists 'idealised' nature, and they think of it in terms of a photographer who touches up a portrait by deleting small blemishes. The Greek approach was really exactly the opposite.

Through all these centuries, the artists were concerned with infusing more and more life into the ancient husks. (...) The old types had begun to move and breath under the hands of the skillful sculptor, and they stand before us like real human beings, and yet as beings from a different world, better world.

Ernst H. Gombrich ¹⁰

Dreams are powerful. They are repositories of our desire. They animate the entertainment industry and drive consumption. They can blind people to reality and provide cover for political horror.

But they can also inspire us to imagine that things could be radically different than they are today, and then believe we can progress toward that imaginary world.

Steven Duncombe ¹¹

[Possible futures] usually take the form of scenarios, often starting with a what-if question, and are intended to open up spaces of debate and discussion; therefore, they are by necessity provocative, intentionally simplified, and fictional.

Their fictional nature requires viewers to suspend their disbelief and allow their imaginations to wander, to momentarily forget how things are now, and wonder about how things could be.

Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby ¹²

For Plato, ideas were pure mental forms existing in the minds of the gods, before human life began. And were consequently above and beyond the world of phenomena.

Anthony Stevens ¹³

It is the realm of Being, eternal and unchanging, while our physical realm of Becoming is only but a manifestation of those pure forms. However, even though unachievable and somehow abstract, forms can serve as guides, drawing attention to the space for improvement.

It smartly aligns with the concept of *eudaimonia*, which focuses on fulfilling one's purpose in life through growth and seeking excellence, rather than achieving a state of happiness as pleasure and contentment.

But what's more interesting here, is the etymology of the term, combining *eu* ('good, well') with *daimōn* ('spirit'), which refers to old beliefs that one goes through life accompanied by a spirit which impersonates what we would call today *the best version of oneself*, and that suggests a collective sense of presence of not quite tangible reality that could be, of potential scenarios encompassing each living being that comes into this world.

Both of those notions base on a strong sense of something imperceptible being a part of everyday life experience, able to have an impact on it, given time and effort.

I absolutely love the twist on this philosophy which Elisabeth Gilbert used as foundation for her concept of creating living - that ideas are living entities, perceptible not by physical senses but imagination, able to make some kind of contact with humans, nudging them, bringing moments of sudden inspiration and being *in the flow*, and guarding over their creative endeavours.

There is something beautiful about that vision of closing the gap between the realm of the potential and the real. However magical, it reflects on our capacity to reach somewhere beyond what is, and what we encounter in reality.

And to some, what they see out there matters so much that they dedicate their life's work to the attempt of capturing it. How come something so meaningful could not really exist?

Greeks believed that each child was blessed at birth with a personal daimon embodying the highest possible expression of his or her nature.

One way they envisioned the daimon was as a golden figurine that would be revealed by cracking away an outer layer of cheap pottery. The effort to know and realize one's most golden self (...) is now the central concept of eudaimonia.

Gabrielle LeBlanc ¹⁴

But the Greeks and the Romans both believed in the idea of an external daemon of creativity (...) They called it your genius - your guardian deity, the conduit of your inspiration.

Which is to say, the Romans didn't believe that an exceptionally gifted person was a genius; they believed that an exceptionally gifted person had a genius.

Elisabeth Gilbert ¹⁵

Ideas have no material body, but they do have consciousness, and they most certainly have will. Ideas are driven by a single impulse: to be made manifest. And the only way an idea can be made manifest in our world is through collaboration with a human partner.

It is only through a human's efforts that an idea can be escorted out of the ether and into the realm of the actual.

Elisabeth Gilbert ¹⁵

4.

For some reason, understanding the workings of the world has always played a pivotal role in our civilisation, and every era, époque, culture, responded to that need through different beliefs, explanations, stories, closely tied to knowledge available at the time, as well as to philosophy, religion and politics - all blended together and served as facts.

With time, as we grew in knowledge, the theories about the world needed to adapt and adjust to findings of Columbus and Vasco da Gama, of Copernicus and Galileo, and many others.

In the end, how we see the world today is way more marvellous and less tangible than any of old civilisations and religions could have imagined - a universe in which Earth plays a role of an insignificant planet, revolving around one star, in one galaxy of so many that we can't even describe their number by rows of digits.

We live in the era of a rational mind discovering and building its image of the world based on science, and which got rid of the burden of naive myths, parables and beliefs. But at what cost?

Those narratives, which emerged across history in different parts of the world, and existed for thousands of years, passed down by generations, written down in books - does their meaning simply come down to stories which were just meant to be believed in?

When approaching Greek or Norse mythology, although we assume the described situations never happened, we don't take away their value, and see them as a vessel for life wisdom dressed in a cultural context.

It's an easy statement to make from a safe distance of centuries. But when facing current religions, we either fall into defending them as historically accurate to hold their meaning true, or we turn away from them completely. Because the liability of religious dogmas is in question, their message seems undermined, unreliable.

We think we can congratulate ourselves on having already reached such a pinnacle of clarity, imagining that we have left all these phantasmal gods far behind. But what we have left behind are only verbal spectres, not the psychic facts that were responsible for the birth of the gods.

Carl G. Jung ¹⁶

Not only has it always been the way of multitudes to interpret their own symbols literally, but such literally read symbolic forms have always been - and still are, in fact - the supports of their civilisations, the supports of their moral orders, their cohesion, vitality, and creative powers.

With the loss of them there follows uncertainty, and with uncertainty, disequilibrium, since life (...) requires 'life-supporting illusions'; and where these have been dispelled, there is nothing secure to hold on to, no moral law, nothing firm.

Joseph Campbell ⁵

We forget that a story is a medium, and we abandon its truths, because they don't seem as true anymore, stripped from a compelling form. In result, we find ourselves missing something, living in a culture of scarcity, falling for values of a consumer society, losing the sense of meaning and purpose, chasing goals sold or imposed by context without reflecting on them, getting more and more out of touch with ourselves. At the same time, because scientific theories base on the body of observations, we forget about their speculative character, and consider them true.

Basically, we find ourselves in the grip of the tendencies of a human mind.

Firstly, the mind seems to easily fall for stories and can't quite cope with a concept of a symbol. Allegories and metaphors sure are great for *explaining* an idea. But there is something about confusing a story with its meaning, and acknowledging its value depending on its credibility. Even having realised the ambiguity of a fictional narrative encompassing valid truths, the mind struggles relying on them. It can't bridge the gap between *understanding* and *knowing*. Stories seem to have the power to reach deeper than pure ideas.

Secondly, in different parts of the globe, across the history of human civilisation, stories emerge as the main medium for passing on the wisdom of the ancestors. Oral traditions stood the test of time, setting a moral footing for societies when literacy was but a privilege of the chosen few. Before *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written down, they existed for centuries merely in the memory of those who sang them.

No matter how amazing of an achievement it seems today, not much has changed since then. Nowadays, creating narratives is a scientifically proven powerful memorising tool. One of the most effective ways to remember a long number for example, is building a scenario based on a chain of associations with each digit. The more specific, in terms of setting time and place, and the stronger emotions connected with it (both positive and negative), the better. Sounds familiar? Skim through the Bible.

To what did [Jung] attribute 'the general neurosis of our age'? To a collective loss of soul, to a loss of contact with the great mythic and religious symbols of our culture.

(...) the benefits of the civilisation are bought at the cost of natural happiness. Jung believed that the more secular, materialistic and compulsively extroverted our civilisation became, the greater the unhappiness, senselessness and aimlessness of our lives.

Anthony Stevens ¹³

What the gods were, were energies inhabiting for the moment a certain concept, a certain belief, a certain structure. (...)

The ego attaches to (...) the secondary image, which arises out of encounters with the holy other, rather than the energy which gave rise that image in the first place.

James Hollis ⁸

Our brains pay much closer attention to information when it's in the form of a narrative. The more you can associate things you want to remember with structures you already have in your mind, the easier it's going to be to remember.

After creating a narrative, when you go to retrieve that memory, you have multiple ways of getting into it.

Netflix series 'The Mind, Explained' ¹⁷

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