

## **I Am Who You Are: Why Politicians Shouldn't Tell Tales**

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I've been thinking about storytelling a lot recently. Partly because of some ongoing work for a show I am making, and partly because of a course I am teaching at the University of Hull, but mainly because of the ongoing campaigns for the election. As the party political machines grind into their highest gears I find myself increasingly unable to make sense of the machine gun spray of statistics and personal anecdote. The only thing that seems truly clear to me is that the bleeding of narrative aesthetics into public discourse has reached such a point that political rhetoric has become almost entirely un-tethered from rationality. Britain's ailing public sphere has lost any meaningful divide between storytelling and rational argument.

As a theatre-maker and storyteller, I am passionate about the way in which the imaginative spaces provided by art can help us to dream collectively about our possible futures. However, as a citizen, I am concerned about the quality of political debate in this country. I am concerned about the way in which our politicians' storytelling serves to obscure the lack of sustained and rigorous arguments in their public statements. Something needs to be done. The process of deliberation within a democracy cannot be subsumed under the banner of storytelling. It isn't that we need to start negating the value of stories. Instead, I put forward my argument as a hopeful request for storytelling to be recognised for what it is in contemporary politics: a powerful tool for sharing hope, but not the means by which our differences are best explored within the process of public deliberation.

Before articulating the functions that stories cannot serve in the public sphere, it is important to understand those that they can. To start arguing against the trend for

storytelling in politics, we need to understand some of the reasons we find stories so compelling - we need to recognise the ways in which stories seduce us into imagining bridges that span the boundaries established by our differences.

For the last two semesters, I have been teaching an undergraduate course on autobiographical storytelling to a group of students at the University of Hull with my colleague Dr Kathy Morgan McKean. The driving force behind my desire to teach the course related to the fine balance of simplicity and complexity within the subject matter. We all have stories to tell about ourselves, and those stories can be the most engaging and intimate things we hear in the theatre or on the radio; however, technical and ethical questions abound when we try to put pen to paper or voice to microphone. How should we approach communicating our stories to an audience? What is our relationship to the past we seek to document? How can the idiosyncratic and personal be made universal? When shall I say my story begins? How do I know if it is finished? Is poetry a betrayal of authenticity? Is this interesting?

To dissipate some of the pressure associated with finding a suitable starting point from which to begin a story, Kathy and I stripped back the practice of storytelling to two simple elements, drawing on an account by Ira Glass, the creator and producer of *This American Life*. A good story, says Glass, contains both anecdote and reflection. When listening to a story, we are drawn in by the unfolding of events - the pleasure and suspense of moving from one moment of happening to another. However, without the punctuation of reflection (a quality built into the narration of events that serves to articulate their potential meaning) anecdotal information loses its impact. With this in mind, telling a story sounds easy: we simply need to establish action and a moral. However, implicit in the simplicity of Glass' account of the story is the complexity associated with the storyteller's point of view. While events can be studied in isolation,

the moments of reflection that Glass values are created by the ways in which an author invites his audience to share his perspective. In order to establish 'a moment of reflection', the events of the story must be organised in such a way that they transcend the personal concerns of the storyteller. They must be offered up for the consideration of the audience member - who is invited to consider their relevance with reference to his own experience. In this way, the events of the story become units of experience whose meaning is illuminated for the audience through a process of ordering that depends on the storyteller's understanding of narrative reception. Without a sense of the reflexive relationship between author and audience, there can be no reflection on the meaning of events. The narrative process articulated by Glass's two fundamental elements depends on both the author's understanding that the audience seeks to empathise and the audience's understanding that the author depends of their empathy. The narrative field that frames the events of the story becomes a place in which both audience and author move back and forth across the boundary that separates alterity and commonality.

To put all of this simply, without falling into the aligned theoretical black holes of semiotics and phenomenology around which narrative aesthetics are doomed to orbit, we like stories because they invite us to imagine that we can share our differences. The subtle interplay of anecdote and reflection, contextualised in the empathetic spaces carved out by the aesthetic conditions of storytelling, allow us to imagine what it might be like to occupy the experiences of those people who confound us with their otherwise unknowable difference.

The best stories contain a heady mix of voyeuristic insight and deliberate confession. It is a mix that engenders hope, whatever the subject matter, because it suggests transcendence. Stories evoke a capacity to travel beyond the boundaries of our materiality and experience something different. They demand an imaginary self-absence

that is paradoxically rooted in the heightening of self-experience. Stories, and our compulsion for them, are deeply connected to our humanity: our capacities for extended play, induction and supposition. They demonstrate a seemingly virtuous alchemy in the way that they order events so as to communicate meaning. However, there is an inherent danger in valuing this a mode of expression too highly.

One of the stories that I gave my class in Hull was John Cheever's *Reunion* (written in 1962). It is a tiny masterpiece, barely stretching beyond 1000 words. Cheever's economy is such that the reader feels that lives have been unfolded in their entirety over the course of three pages. As one reads of the brief and desperate interactions of an estranged father and son one afternoon in New York, it seems that a closing era of manhood has been explained and lamented. Yet, on reflection, the reader knows very little. The elegance with which Cheever builds a subtle sense of pathos into his telling of the events leads us to believe we understand a great deal, while we are actually being given tiny, fragmentary morsels. In his mastery, Cheever captures our empathy and imagination, our desire to ascribe meaning to the world, while leaving us to guess at the full details of his characters' fictional reality.

Cheever's story is a marvellous example of the short story form - succinct and rich in its exploration of human experience. It also sows the seeds for the articulation of my discontent. By pointing out subtly crafted details, *Reunion* makes us feel as though we understand, providing us with an apparently solid perspective to occupy and explore. The narrative space is open enough for the reader to feel as though he is not imposing on the character's lives, but not so generic as to suggest a lack of specificity and profundity. The invitation Cheever offers for us to pretend that difference can be overcome is almost invisible. He writes the name 'Charlie' and allows us to feel as both ourselves and the character without any sense of cognitive dissonance. Such artistry is

commendable in fiction, but in reality the sweeping away of such dissonance must be read as problematic. The story provides a model for the way in which our reflection on events can be swayed by the careful organisation of perspective within a narrative. It is a model that is invoked when David Cameron talks about his children as he sets out his policies on the NHS, or when Ed Milliband allows the pulpy cliché ‘Hell yes, I’m tough enough!’ to cross his lips.

When Cameron talks about the tragedy of his son Ivan’s ill-health, he frames himself as a subject for empathy. He constructs a narrative in which we are invited to transcend the limits of our selves and occupy the landscape he presents as his own. While this might not seem to be any more disquieting than reading a novel or watching a film, I contend that the use of expressive techniques borrowed from narrative arts privileges empathy over other kinds of imaginative experience that are equally necessary in the context of political discourse.

Perhaps the most profound problems we might associate with political storytelling can be found in the fact that if we are invited to imagine Cameron’s perspective we cannot separate our sense of his reality from our own. The collapsing of difference through empathy is a vital part of our humanity, but that fact should not obscure the importance of separating self and other when considering the distribution of rights and goods in a democratic society. To put this simply, if Ed Milliband forces us to associate him with a two-dimensional hero from a drama about a good man trying to do right in a broken system, we might not be able to hear him when he outlines the full detail policies. To invoke the research outlined by Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, the empathy and perspective-sharing demanded by storytelling promotes a kind of quick association with the storyteller’s identity and feelings that precludes a potentially more thoughtful, deliberative engagement with his ideas.

Kahneman's approach provides us with an indication of the ways in which an audience's thinking might be affected by a speaker's approach; however, it is not be entirely useful in this context to set up a distinction between the irrational and the rational in the way outlined in *Thinking Fast and Slow*. It is, perhaps, more sensible to look at the differentiation between paradigmatic and narrative thinking, described by Jerome Bruner in his book *Actual Minds, Possible Words*. For Bruner, the paradigmatic (or logico-scientific) mode is concerned with verifiable truth, while the narrative mode is concerned with the expression of meaning. Bruner notes that both modes demand imagination. However, he argues that paradigmatic thought, rooted in long-accepted practices of logic and mathematics, deploys imagination in order 'to see possible formal connections before one is able to prove them in any formal way', while the narrative imagination is concerned, as James Joyce claimed, with epiphanies of the every day.

In his analysis of narrative thinking, Bruner echoes Ira Glass's analysis of the separation between anecdote and reflection, suggesting that:

[S]tory must create two landscapes simultaneously. One is the landscape of action, where the constituents are the agents of action: agent, intention or goal, situation, instrument, something corresponding to a 'story grammar'. The other landscape is the landscape of consciousness: what those involved in the action know, think, or feel, or do not know, think or feel. The two landscapes are essential and distinct: it is the difference between Oedipus sharing Jocasta's bed before and after he learns from the messenger that she is his mother.

While the paradigmatic mode can also be understood as a way to categorise and order events, it does not seek to convey epiphany. The narrative mode is driven by the desire to convey realisation through providing a perspective for the audience to occupy. Bruner states, 'psychic reality dominates narrative and any reality that exists beyond the

awareness of those involved in the story is put there by the author with the object of creating dramatic effect.’ With this claim in mind we can begin to see the potentially pernicious effects of the collision between personal stories and politics. Through invoking their personal pain or triumph, politicians replace argument with catharsis. By framing a discussion of the NHS in narrative terms, referring to the painful experiences of one’s parents or children, politicians and citizens lose sight of the contested spaces that need to feel the light of evidence and argument. While it is wonderful to be invited to transcend our differences, this invitation needs to be balanced in relation to an honouring of our differences in the public sphere. A good story makes us think we understand, that we have located meaning; however, it is not always the case that their logic stays with us beyond their final paragraphs. I can sympathise with the Prime Minister and find epiphany in his sharing of personal tragedy, but that doesn’t mean that his policies are right.

The conflation of argument and empathy, and the attempt to resist our differences, is a long-standing rhetorical practice; however, the impact of narrative thinking on contemporary political debate, highlighted by the emphasis on a perceived need to empathise with our leaders, seems particularly pressing as the amount of information citizens must process in order to feel legitimately informed becomes ever more vast. The documentary maker Adam Curtis has argued that we have entered an age in which the way that information is presented has begun ‘to undermine people’s perception of the world so they never know what is really happening’. In his 2014 film for Charlie Brooker’s *Screenwipe*, Curtis was able to draw on a wide range of contradictions in public discussions of recent global events. He notes that troops have returned from Afghanistan without us having any clear consensus on whether the war was a success or failure; he notes the confusing nature of the international community’s contradictory position in

relation to the warring factions in Syria; and he notes the fundamentally opposing ways in which the post crash economy has been explained by those in power.

While the tone of Curtis' film is somewhat apocalyptic, his assessment of the problems associated with explaining the complexity of global relations is astute. The UK's two main political parties seem to have taken up contradiction as a fixed position, each drawing on their own cache of statistics, with the effect that every head-to-head debate presented on the BBC demands an independent expert to pass comment on the veracity and use of figures. Nick Robinson seems to be on permanent stand-by, ready to provide level-headed and sober punditry on a politicians' performance the very moment it has finished.

We have created a political context in which it is increasingly difficult to know who is right and why. As the boundaries of the paradigmatic have faded into the distance we have increasingly begun to rely on narratives of identity as a shorthand for establishing understanding within political discourse. At a loss to establish the truth, we have settled for verisimilitude, using stories to create false epiphanies instead of soberly exploring our different claims to the truth. Politicians have been left to search for the perfect moment of reflection with which to frame the reality they seek to control. They have been placed at the head of the table while we demand that they look like one of the crowd.

In some ways it is appropriate to blame our current predicament on the explosion of informational complexity in our global village. However, we might also consider the emergence of narrative thinking in the public sphere with reference to the growing perception of democracy as a form of government in which citizens' equivalence is administrated, rather than a system for deliberative participation. Hannah Arendt, a thinker whose work we should reconsider on a much larger scale, was adamant that political life demanded a clear separation of public and private. Arendt made this claim

not because she failed to see the ways in which certain perspectives and identities were privileged in public life, but because she understood that deliberation demanded a critical and public examination of the things we hold dear within our private moments. In order to be in the world as a true democrat Arendt argued we must find a shared reality that honours our differences: a space in which we seek to know more, rather than a narrative space that persuades us to imagine we know more than we do.

I don't think Arendt would disagree that many of the issues to emerge from the explosion of identity politics have been useful as ways for the dispossessed and oppressed to start public dialogues about their concerns – challenging the dominant social landscape by pointing out that prevailing hierarchies of power aren't normative paradigms. However, when the revolutionary landscape is colonised by friendly faces educated at Eton, Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge working hard to persuade us that we are all the same, the various pulsing beats that mark our differences are worryingly flattened out into something that pretends falsely to homogeneity. Instead of the uncanny drag queen belting out Gloria Gaynor's *I am What I am*, we are left with David, Ed and Nick imploring us to believe them when they say, arms outstretched in the requisite inclusive gesture, 'Don't worry, we are who you are'.

It must be understood that the paradigmatic mode of thought has limited value when used without reference to the context supplied by the dreams we share during narrative thinking. However, we must be careful that we do not seek to stop communicating at the moment that our perspective has been successfully shared. A truly democratic politics can only begin at the story's end. It is important that we seek to look through each other's eyes, but when we have seen the view it is vital that we go back to our places and start talking rationally about the differences in our policies.