



## **The Power of Story: Words on the Wing** **By: Rebecca Chamberlain<sup>1</sup>**

*The truth about stories is that's all we are* (Thomas King, 2003, p. 153).

### **Problem:**

**Stories are fundamental to being human. How do they change as languages and cultures evolve through different communication technologies? In the age of cyberspace we often feel alienated from genuine stories, ones that we live with every day, that tell us how to become decent human beings and live meaningful lives. Corporate media exploit story patterns that evolved to pass on ethical codes, and we are trapped into thinking about products instead of reflecting on our lives. Traditional myths explored dynamic relationships between humans and nature. How can stories to help us adapt to our quickly changing world?**

**Context:** This pattern addresses the concerns of organizations and individuals involved in: Education, Culture, Arts, Society, Mythology, Technology, Law, Philosophy, Humanities, Psychology, Science, Environmental Studies, Religion, Social & Political Science, and Activism.

### **Discussion:**

*One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.*

Ben Okri (1997, p. 46).

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<sup>1</sup> **From: *Liberating Voices! A Pattern Language For Communication Revolution*. Ed. Doug Schuler. Boston: MIT Press, 2008.**

[http://www.publicsphereproject.org/patterns/pattern.pl/public?pattern\\_id=493](http://www.publicsphereproject.org/patterns/pattern.pl/public?pattern_id=493)

Patterns in stories tend to reflect the environments we live in and the communication media we use. Indigenous peoples evolved patterns in oral traditions that resonated with the voices of the land and reinforced memory and meaning. The invention of writing and the phonetic alphabet played with the way language and images could be displayed as texts. The advent of the printing press offered freedom to experiment with new narrative and poetic forms, as well as restraints, as texts and language became standardized. The structure of stories changed as they moved from the places they were told onto the printed page (Ong 1992, Kane 1994, Abrahm 1996).

In an image from ancient Greece, a poet pours wine to the Muse, Erato, who appears in the form of a bird. Today, can words again become “winged” as they fly through both time and space in new forms offered by electronic media? Speech is communal; it exists only as it is being shared. As stories shift and change in response to new environments and technologies, who has access and jurisdiction to manipulate them? Can these new mediums offer opportunities to engage our senses and help us reconnect to the natural world? Can this enriched experience help us reflect on the deeper messages that stories contain?

Stories are conduits or vehicles that mediate our inner and outer worlds. When we tell stories, we are connected to live events and internal dramas. Modern cultures utilize technology to record ideas or performances, and tend to value the analysis of texts, recordings, and other artifacts of expression. We cultivate methods of reflection that reinforce our capacity to respond, think, and explore symbolic messages, but our objectivity makes us feel removed or alienated from authentic experience. We often yearn for the mystery of stories to deepen our lives.

Oral cultures are immersed in ritual and experience; the time, place, and context in which a story is told is crucial to its meaning. Myths, which convey symbolic messages, are also repositories or living encyclopedias of practical knowledge and wisdom gained from sustainable relationships to the natural world. Oral traditions resonate with mnemonic patterns, poetic rhythms, tones, and inflections of local landscapes (Kane 1994, Abrahm, 1996).

Richard Louv (2006) points out that studies of the songs of birds and whales reveal many of the same laws of composition as those used by humans. New scientific methods have enabled humans to learn about the intricate patterns of human and animal communication, but have not given most children a deep or genuine experience of animals and the stories or songs grounded in the natural world. This results in what Love describes as the modern child’s “hyper-intellectualized” perception of nature and other animals (p. 23).

Technology gives us tools to analyze and preserve traditional stories, but also disrupts and alienates people from meaningful stories that connect them with sustainable patterns in the natural world. Modern myths are often caught up in the social, political, and economic systems that our new technologies have created. Those who control the stories, knowledge, and mediums of communication wield the power (Czitrom, 1982).

Marsahll McLuhan (1962) explores the shadow side of technological and economic success by arguing that popular culture is a source for diagnosing the “collective trance” of industrial society. Ads are a new kind of storytelling; “a social ritual or magic that enhances us in our own eyes (p. 50).” Rolf Jensen (1996) says, “The highest-paid person in the first half of the next century will be the ‘storyteller.’ Many global companies are mainly storytellers, and the value of products depends on the story they tell (p. 10)” Advertisers proclaim freedom of choice as the foundation of the American way of life; however, they gloss over questions of power and control. McLuhan suggests that individuals break the hypnotic trance of the media through tough-minded evaluation that probes the collective myths of our industrial folklore.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell (1972) says, “not only have the old mythic notions of the nature of the cosmos gone to pieces, but also those of the origins of the history of mankind (p. 12).” He suggests, that to give meaning to life, the modern person cannot simply reproduce inherited patterns of thought or action, but must create their own stories. Since many people start with seeds provided by the media, how do they proceed?

Words and stories are active agents. Ernest Cassirer (1946) says that the “word,” in early cosmologies, is the primary force from which being and doing originate (p. 44). Likewise, the cause and

effect of media and print “word magic” in modern cultures determines our political and economic systems, and can result in nationalism and colonialism. Traditional stories and myths that have evolved from oral, consensually shared standards and beliefs that value feeling and community interaction have come into conflict with technologies that value independence, analytical thought, and scientific or secular authority (Ong, 1982). Modern civilization is faced with a split between the head and the heart.

In the Greek myth of the phonetic alphabet, King Cadmus plants dragons' teeth (alphabetic symbols) that rise up as armed men (McLuhan 1962, p. 50). If the alphabet could have such effects, what is the effect of modern technologies? We face the problem of how to deal ethically with the power humans have manufactured through technology. Can we recover a sense of reverence for the word without fueling tribal or national myths that sew dragons' teeth?

Thoreau anticipated these arguments in “Walking,” when he says, “There are other letters for the child to learn than those which Cadmus invented (Atkinson, 2000, p. 656).” Rather than learning letters in dusty schools, Thoreau wanted students to learn from wilderness. For him, mythology came close to expressing the language of nature. He advocates a kind of “tawny grammar” that celebrates what is wild and free. Through this, he says, “The highest that we can attain is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence (Atkinson, p. 657).”

Perhaps McLuhan suggests a solution to our dilemma when he says, “two cultures or technologies can, like astronomical galaxies, pass through one another without collision; but not without change of configuration (p. 149).” Are we ready for a transformation of this magnitude? Can we connect traditional stories and myths with new technologies in ways that don't hypnotize us into a trance, but actually engage us more completely with community and the natural world?

### **Solution/Summary:**

Storytelling, an ancient art, needs to be rediscovered and updated. Stories help humankind to understand, reinterpret, and reframe the meanings that under-gird their existence. Can we use new communications technologies to weave together words and images, scientific information and poetic inspiration, and incorporate multiple voices (including the larger community of plants, animals, birds, and elemental forces) to tell multi-faceted stories of our earth communities? Can stories help us to weave together the communications and global challenges that face us as we learn to live co-creatively with each other and the natural world?

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