

## **STORYTELLING IS SELLING**

© Leo Haviland

August 1, 2014

“A powerful agent is the right word.” Mark Twain

\*\*\*\*

Not all sacred cows and alleged truths that constitute widely accepted wisdom are worthy of faith and veneration.

“Information is everywhere”, we’re told. We often demand: “Just give me the facts.” Haven’t you thought or even said: “Before I show you the money (or believe or behave as you want me to), show me the data”?

If you have all the data, then surely you can make the correct or best decision, right? Wrong.

The way I see the world, behind everything there’s always a crafted story, not merely a basket loaded with diligently harvested facts. In culture, there is no objective category of “the facts” or “all the facts”. Cultural players, in their quests to persuade others, always select and present what in their opinion is relevant information. Trained, practiced (and often paid) storytellers choose and manipulate “the data” to tell their story, not “the” story.

You ask me: “What storyteller?” Am I talking about best-selling novelists and screenwriters? Yes. But numerous enterprising and talented storytellers roam throughout all cultural territories. Picture Wall Street, Main Street, the Washington DC political battlefield, religious faiths, social media networks, and the legal profession. Consider corporations offering us gasoline, pharmaceuticals, homes, consumer goods and services, and entertainment. Think of economists and other social “scientists”. Imagine college humanities teachers.

These clever, well-versed individuals, groups, firms, and institutions aim not merely to attract and keep our attention, perhaps entertaining us in the process. They battle not merely to capture listeners but also to convince them.

Nowadays, a lot of effort is spent trying to move others from Point A to Point B. Cultural storytellers invest a huge share of their resources (time, energy, human capital, and of course often money) . Designing and packaging an alluring personal perspective and compelling arguments, orators fiercely compete to educate and persuade their target audience to embrace their point of view and act accordingly. These storytellers want us to think and behave according to their opinion regarding what is good, reasonable, intelligent, and prudent. Buy their product, use their service, invest in these stocks, vote for this candidate, support this doctrine, and so forth. Selling is storytelling.

And storytelling is selling, a persuasive enterprise. Many of us employ a substantial chunk of our time at work seeking to get others to “buy in” to our story. Having voyaged in the Wall Street sales and trading universe for over 30 years, I came to see not only my own work but also that of my colleagues, firm, and clients as selling and storytelling. In my analysis of stocks, bonds, currencies, and commodities as well as in my writings on the American Dream and related topics, I select and organize facts that I spin into a tale intended to convince you.

In today’s complex, competitive, and rapidly changing world, few individuals are expert in more than a couple of fields. It’s hard and time-consuming to stay well-informed and be up-to-date in

many domains. We're too busy, too tired, or lack adequate training. Yet since many of the decisions outside of our field of expertise are very important to us, we rely on storytellers for guidance regarding realms relatively unfamiliar to us.

All of us want to learn and be enlightened, have an edge, and improve our opportunities and outcomes. Many of us want to be well-informed about the viewpoints, motives, and methods of those enthusiastically striving to convince us.

However, cultural leaders and their trusted apostles marshal language and concepts embedded in our culture to influence our outlooks and guide our behavior. In addition, we often take the persuasive sermons and strategies of talented storytellers for granted, and not just when we've already faithfully adopted their opinions for a long time. Imagine a scene in which many others seemingly like us express devotion to the story's message. Suppose the eloquent speaker advising us is prestigious.

Why study cultural storytellers and their stories? Focus on three Es: entertainment, education, and empowerment. Analyzing them can entertain us and satisfy our curiosity. Much more importantly, there's inherent value in increasing our knowledge and sharpening our reasoning and judgment. Isn't it profitable to acquire insight regarding how and why alluring propaganda is trying to get you to think and act in a given fashion? We should ask if the charming narratives designed to persuade us nevertheless could injure us. Words want action, yet action (or inaction) sometimes can cost us plenty.

By not taking stories sold to us for granted, we become less passive. Exposing, examining, and understanding the persuasive perspectives, techniques, values, and goals of these cultural storytellers therefore will empower us. We therefore may make better decisions. Perhaps we'll also become more talented persuaders ourselves.

In this process, keep the American Dream culture in mind. We should highlight the relationship and tension between our shared and sacred vision and the reality we find ourselves in today. To what extent is the American Dream currently eroding or evolving? For example, glance at America's political theater. Legislative gridlock reigns in Washington. Underscore the sharp political divisions and fierce national debates on issues such as immigration, Obamacare, abortion rights, gun control, tax policy, and entitlements. In politics and elsewhere, alongside their artful use of metaphors, devoted storytellers employ the language, structure, and promise of the American Dream gospel to attract, enlist, and guide followers. Their missionary rhetoric associates themselves and their stories, products, and services in diverse ways to one or more praiseworthy American Dream goals and values.

With greater power comes greater responsibility. By being more enlightened, by choosing a "me-do-it" approach as consumers and citizens, we can take more responsibility for our perspectives and actions and their consequences. Some of us, especially if we work together, thereby can help make the world a better place.