



## Why Storytelling is the Ultimate Life Hack

A couple weeks ago we took the kids to see “Avatar: The Way of Water,” a beautiful and moving film. While perhaps a little long, it’s worth the watch, not only for its stunning visuals but also for the interesting way Cameron weaves together several archetypal stories into one coherent narrative. It’s at once a movie about family and community, fatherhood and motherhood, war, sacrifice, attachment, duty, morality, and the meaning of life—truly the stuff of fairy tales, epics, and mythology all rolled into one.

When the movie was over, I took my son to the bathroom—I still cannot believe he made it all the way through!— and a fellow movie goer walked in with us. He was a man probably about my age, wearing a white tank top and covered in tattoos and he was crying his eyes out! The stark contrast between the man’s tough outer appearance and the raw vulnerability of his emotional state really made an impression and reminded me about the importance of what’s happening in these moments.

As we walked out of the theatre my son asked me “Daddy, why was that man so sad?”

I paused for a second before answering. There’s the easy and kind of dismissive way to answer this question for a kid. “Oh, he just got caught-up in the emotions of the movie. Remember that scene where such and such happened (I don’t want to spoil the movie!), well that’s kind of sad, right?” And then there’s the real answer, which isn’t so easy.

You see, you cannot really understand humanity without understanding what’s going on with stories. For what really is a human being? “A storytelling mammal” is about as good as a definition as you can find. Storytelling is basically what we do.

Books. Movies. TV Shows. Opera. Plays. Even Gossip...

We are literally obsessed by stories, so much so, that we have a kind of unlimited demand for them. This is what binge

watching is all about. And, curiously, it doesn't seem to matter that we keep telling the same stories over and over again. Yeah, the environment, events and characters change but there's a surprising consistency to the types of stories we tell. From a narrative arc perspective, we're basically telling and retelling like 20 different stories. For a brilliant and comprehensive review of this phenomenon read Joseph Campbell's staggering work "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," one of the most important books ever written.

What's going-on here? Well, as human beings we have this big problem. Life happens to be quite difficult—"no sh!t Nick"—and in order just to make it we have to learn a staggering amount of information, knowledge, skills...etc. Think about it. It literally takes at least two decades—and sometimes even more—to raise a reasonably functioning human. How about a thriving human? Now that's a whole other art altogether. There the demands for learning are massively higher.

Essentially, we have a serious time problem. We just don't have enough of it or at least cannot help but feel that way. Not only is time the source of all fear—its inexorable passage reminding us constantly that we too will someday die—but also it's a kind of psychological fountainhead of all the scarcity we feel in the world. What are the universal famous last words of life? "If only I had more time!"

What we've discovered about ourselves through science is that we are a kind of embodied consciousness and, as such, we learn best through actual experience. There's something about actually going through something in our living, breathing body that enables deep learning. The problem for us is that life is so complicated that our individual experience alone just isn't going to cut it. We have way more to learn than what we can experience directly. So, if we could only rely on our direct lived experience, we would be woefully unprepared for the myriad and unpredictable challenges of life. Here's where stories come in.

The story was our first and greatest life hack, the ultimate tool for the transmission of knowledge. Stories are how we learn something without actually having to experience it.

Somewhere along the way in our evolution we realized that a story could transmit knowledge and wisdom to us in the same way that actual experience does. It's not

exactly the same kind of learning but it's a surprisingly effective approximation. This was a game changer when it came to learning. All of a sudden, we had access to the entire collective experience of humanity. All we had to do was turn things into stories and start sharing. This phenomenon goes back a very long way but clearly by the time of Aristotle we had really figured it out. Consider his definition of a "tragedy":

*"Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."*

What Aristotle is saying here is that what makes a story so effective at approximating experience is that it can produce the same kind of emotions as in real life. And what's happening when you engage with a story, especially one that is told in the right way, is a process of vicarious emotional identification where you can actually learn the same lessons that the characters in the stories are learning. Now, we don't have enough time to get into all the details for how and why this works today but take my word for it that this process—Aristotle's idea of catharsis—works and does so quite well and is the reason we are obsessed with stories.

As humans we may possess a rather unique capacity for rationality but it is not reason that is our best teacher. Not even close. It is the experience of powerful emotion that really clarifies and solidifies things for us. In fact, the more intense the emotion, the better the learning. And what's crazy about stories is that if they are told in the right way they can produce the exact same kind emotional experience as in real life. Hence, the gentlemen crying in the bathroom after Avatar!

If you are still wondering whether I attempted to explain all this to my son or just opted for the easy answer, well, I did. And it went completely around and over his head. It turns out it's rather hard to talk this through on the fly. But I'm convinced it was worth the effort. At the very least, it gave me something to share with you all. □