



The Power of Story in an Age of Consequence

Peter Forbes
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Sit back and listen to these words: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Sages Ravine, Spruce Knob, Dickinson's Reach, Moosilauke, Arun River Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Chama River, Arch Rock, Drake's Beach, Knoll Farm.

That's my biography. These words, these places, tell my story. And they mean much more than that to me. These places are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up my body. This is my alchemy of land, people, and story. Without these particular places in my life, I would not be who I am. And each of you has your own similar biography.

Here's a different biography:

That's the beginning of the story of the people who live here in this part of the world.

Querencia: A mestizo word, defined for me by Estevan Arrellano:

The place where the animal lives

The tendency of humans to return to where they were born

Affection, Responsibility

The space where one feels secure

The place of one's memories

The tendency to love and be loved

My point is this: our relationship to land, good, bad, and indifferent, is *still the enduring story of our lives* whether we believe it or not. Even in 2007, few forces will have as much effect on the course of our lives, our cities, our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil.

I wanted to talk with you *not* just because you are environmentalists, but because of your potential to help people believe in a new story about people, land, community and health.

Our culture has a dysfunctional relationship with story. On the one hand we see storytelling as something we do only at bedtime for our young children, or as something someone with a leather vest and a ponytail called a "story-teller" does.

But on the other hand, we pay our best and brightest youth \$120,000 per year right out of college to craft "Coke adds life" stories. This is a particularly powerful form of story: the advertisement. Modern life in America is brimming over with these inauthentic stories.

For the 99.9 percent of human history that existed before the industrial age, before the steam engine, before the radio, before nuclear power, before television and iPods, *there was story*. Story has always been the way we explain our relationships and who we are.

This is the way I want you to think of story, the way story is explained by the Nigerian novelist Ben Okri:

“Stories are the secret reservoir of our values: change the stories individuals and nation live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations. Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.”

I must tell you what I know of the truth. Even your own organizations – no matter what it is that they do – cannot possibly do all the good that needs to be done right now in our communities. It is not possible for you, alone, to meet *your own stated goals*. There are too many obstacles and too little time for you to carry the burden of your work alone. Today, the task is to translate the deep significance of your work to this age of consequence, so that there’s a world out there that knows, and cares, and responds.

Our challenge is to help our neighbors and ourselves to imagine, and then create, a different world. Story has the power to do that.

I know some of you here today. You are successful people. You care about your missions. You work exceedingly hard. You do exemplary work, but it is *not sufficient*.

Today, our culture produces more malls than high schools, more prisoners than farmers, and eats up the land with a voracious appetite: 250 acres per hour. The environmental educator David Orr tells us that the average American child today can recognize 1,000 corporate logos but can’t identify ten plants or animals native to his or her own region.

Tell me, what’s the spell we have fallen under to create this world we live in? Tom Wessels, the great educator, reminds us that our declaration of independence begins, “we the people.” “We the people” was the original America story, but captains of industry said this story had to change to “me the consumer.”

And that powerful story is woven into the 30,000 advertisements that reach our children each year. This spell says that the Earth is a warehouse for our use, that nature is inexhaustible, that we have rights to it but no responsibilities, that nothing has value that can’t be converted into money. This spell whispers to us hourly that the point of forests is board feet, the point of farms is money, and the point of people is to be consumers.

This spell has fattened our pocketbooks and lengthened our lives, but it has also created a dangerous and deeply unfair world of haves and have-nots, and a pathology of disconnection and alienation. One evidence of this disconnection is that 25 percent of all Americans now experience serious clinical depression during their lifetime. And if your family income is over \$150,000 a year, the incidence of anxiety and depression is even higher. Is this American dream bringing us progress or extinction?

Today we are experiencing the side-effects of a failed story: namely our own addictions, greed, and loss of relationships, loss of land and loss of other species of life.

Let me go further. Many of the exact things that define the healthy human experience are threatened today by this story.

- Our ability to judge between what is real and what is artificial
- Our sense of our spiritual or metaphysical place in the “big picture”
- Our sense of belonging
- Our sense of tolerance and acceptance of other life

The writer and ecologist, Robert Michael Pyle, coined the phrase “extinction of experience” in his important book *The Thunder Tree*. He writes:

“People who care conserve; people who don’t know don’t care. *What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?*”

People who don’t know don’t care. What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?

The child who doesn’t know the wren is the child who is afraid of walking to school, the child who has already begun to feel boundaries surround her. And, of course, this child is a symbol of the greater pathos of disconnection that many of us feel.

What’s the role of story, then, in turning around this situation?

The best example I can offer is to remind you that Martin Luther King did not say, “I have a *plan*”. He said I have a *dream*, and he spoke of his deepest values without offering strategy and tactics about how we might get to his dream. He knew that if he could reach people with shared values then he could respect them to move in the right directions of their own accord.

For those of us who care about people and place, *our* most important work is to put forward a new dream *without being dreamy*. As Paul Hawken says, “our dreams must walk a sobriety test, they need to be clear and walk a straight line.”

Today's enduring purpose of environmentalism doesn't rest in saving land or species alone, but in changing how people think and act.

We cannot restore land without re-storying culture. What I mean is this: one can certainly restore a wetland or designate land wilderness, but that place will be degraded in the future if there are not people who feel connected to it, who tell stories about it, who love it.

Environmentalists have made a strategic error in assuming that our work is more a legal act than a cultural act, assuming we can protect land *from people through laws as opposed to with people through relationships*. Laws codify values, not create them. If the people in a democracy no longer care about the land, the laws that protect that land will not hold. The massive, vital work of conservation today is to reweave this still spectacular landscape with the human experience, relating land to everyday human choice and life.

Your long-term success as change agents will come not solely through a reliance on information, plans, and data, but on your heartfelt use of story. Our dreams can easily be drowned by our facts.

Let me explain why I think this is true.

The world's environmental crisis is really a crisis of values, that is to say that it concerns the yearnings of the human heart and soul. I propose, therefore, that we speak of our work from the heart and from our values. And let me go further, though I know this will make some of you squirm: I propose that we also speak of our faith. Not religion, but faith.

What do we really have faith in today?

In these professional circles, we rarely speak of our values because they're perceived as soft and *we need to be hard*. We rarely tell stories, because *we think our job is to prove things and you can't prove a story*. And we don't speak of what we have faith in, because *we are often afraid of religion*.

And, honestly, leading with one's values is leading with one's chin. It's not a safe place is it? If you lead with your values, you will be vulnerable; you will risk making comfortable relationships uncomfortable. You will risk trusting others. There's the risk that you will be misinterpreted and taken advantage of, rejected. You risk being ridiculed and marginalized.

It's the difficulty of speaking about nuance in a culture of pounding fists and elevator pitches. But there are enormous successes: when you lead with your values, you provoke what is real and genuine, you demonstrate your moral voice, and you will actually grow

and change. Through putting your values first, you will lead from behind and achieve more than you ever thought because others will be drawn to you.

And so many of my heroes—Rachel Carson, Arundhati Roy, Wendell Berry (perhaps your heroes as well)—have led with their values, and moved nations by their faith.

I worry that we are hiding behind our five-year plans and our budgets and our strategies and action plans, because it's easier and safer than speaking our values.

Story, my friends, is the way we gently speak of our values.

Let me tell you what, in my view, stories are and aren't.

Stories help us to imagine the future differently and thereby change the way we act in the world.

Stories are easily understood by different people, so they help us to communicate and be open to the claims of others. Story helps us see through the eyes of other people, and, as Alison Deming said, to cross the borders that separate us from one another.

Stories help us dwell in time, and help us to deal with suffering, loss and death. Stories teach us empathy, and how to be human. We tell stories to reveal our most authentic selves, and to pull ourselves toward our most authentic selves.

Gene Knudsen Hoffman once said that an enemy is one whose story we have not yet heard.

We pay a steep price for the lack of story in our lives: it leads to fear of one another, to loneliness, to no shared values, and to the neglect of our communities. Without stories, there are only strategies and tactics. And in such a world, we are less than whole; we are brittle, competitive, and prone to exaggeration.

Story is more than information, which tends to be about data and numbers. Information presents itself as factual and objective, though we know it can be neither of these. Information is authoritative, and story is empathetic.

Story is ultimately about relationship. The soul of **the land** becomes the soul of our culture not through information or data alone, but through the metaphor and analogy of story.

The epic choice between fear and love is deeply rooted in all stories. Politicians use fear and, quite honestly, so do environmentalists. Environmentalists use fear by focusing on

what people will lose. Environmentalists talk mostly about what they are against and what they fear, and less about what they are for.

The work of Center for Whole Communities is to lead a conceptual revolution by making some different ideas real in the bone and muscle of today's movements for change. We welcome to Knoll Farm hundreds of very different leaders: urban gardeners, ranchers, wilderness advocates, native activists, human rights workers, teachers, writers, biologists, to find shared meaning and common courage.

We teach that relationship is as fundamental as places and things.

We teach that you can't demand a different world, you have to inspire it. Today's most important work is not about making manifestos and demanding change, but releasing in the population what's already there.

We build bridges: we teach that it's possible to look across the divides of our nation and to recognize new allies.

Finally, we teach the need for a new story that helps people to find their way out of the old story.

This new story is filled with many different faces. It is about aspirations, not negativity. It's about what people will get, not what they will lose. This new story is in a language everyone can understand, needs no elevator pitch, and says what we are for, not what we are against.

It is a story that people can visualize, of a mission accomplished. It's a story that re-defines wealth as being about relationships, not money. This new story is a story about justice, about becoming aware of others by becoming aware of ourselves.

This story is as much about listening as it is about speaking.

This new story embraces change, is made up of many short stories, always unfolding and slow to be heard. It is one we will tell our children, and they will tell their children, and their children, and their children.

The new story will always be challenged, and will change over and over again until everyone recognizes it as their own.

This new story is told in the fields, in mines, on YouTube, in banks, and begins with the questions, Are you ready to be well? It will call forward parts we forgot that we had.

We will recognize this new story when the children dance to it.

It shows that we value diversity, that we can practice restraint, that Americans are defined by their fairness and compassion, that our values as a people include sacrifice, humility, generosity, respect.

Your work is to listen for and to re-tell this new story, and the best way to do that is to sit down with someone you are afraid of and tell them who you are, and let them tell you who they are.

A Ritual to Read to Each Other

by William Stafford (1960)

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park.
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider –
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give – yes, no, or maybe –
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Let me show you what I mean by introducing you to my friend, Classie Parker.

Classie's a third generation resident of 121st Street. She grew up in the same building off Frederick Douglass Boulevard where her mother was born. Classie didn't aspire to be an activist and didn't have a grand vision about running a community program. She was flipping hamburgers at White Castle and thinking about her mom and dad who were growing old and needed a way to work and be outside. Classie got the radical idea to turn the vacant lot alongside her apartment building into a garden. That was almost ten years

ago and today Classie produces food, beauty, tolerance, and a relationship to land for more than 500 families in central Harlem. Five Star Garden is almost absurdly small, just a quarter acre, but for the people of 121st Street—who, for the most part, never leave Harlem—the garden is their own piece of land to which they have developed a very deep personal attachment. These are Classie’s words:

We think of ourselves as farmers, city farmers. Never environmentalists. Don’t call me an environmentalist. We love people and plants; we love being with the earth, working with the earth. There is something here in this garden for everyone. And any race, creed, or color . . . now, can you explain that? This is one of the few places in Harlem where they can be free to be themselves. It’s hard to put into words what moves people to come in this garden and tell us their life stories, but it happens every day. There’s love here. People gonna go where they feel the flow of love.

There is a difference. You come in here and sit down, Peter— don’t you feel comfortable with us? Don’t you feel you’re free to be you? That we’re not going to judge you because you’re a different color or because you’re a male? Do you feel happy here? Do you feel intimidated? Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?

Classie boiled it all down: “Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?” I remember laughing a bit nervously as Classie said this because I wasn’t prepared for her candor and hopefulness. I paused just a moment, and then looked up at her father, sitting ten feet across from me with his feet firmly planted on the earth, both hands resting on canes, eighty-seven years old, garden dirt on his face. “Don’t you feel like my dad’s your dad?”

Passing one another on the street, our eyes might not have met long enough to see one another’s humanity. But there on that patch of earth, what we had in common at that moment was profound: it was the soil, that place, the love and hope that Classie held for us, and the awareness that my own pulse beat in his throat.

This is the soul of the land. It is also the soul of our country; the empathetic soul that I believe is there waiting to be spoken to. This is the generosity, patience, respect and inclusiveness that come naturally to many Americans. You know these stories, too, because they are your stories.

Your work can bring into people’s moral universe a renewed sense of fairness, belonging, meaning, respect, joy and love. I know this soul of America thrives.

There is, of course, another soul to this country that is more often in our face. It’s the unfairness of toxic dumps in places where the people have less power and control; it’s the exploitation of shaving-off mountain tops for cheap energy; it’s the mania of polluting our natural water systems while simultaneously creating expensive markets for bottled water.

Both of these *souls of our country* get played out on the land itself. Our sense of forbearance, respect, love of diversity, appreciation of beauty, *our very nurturance as a culture* is represented in the national parks, healthy farms and homesteads, sacred mountains, wildlife refuges, wild lands and land trusts of our nation.

Which story will prevail? Which story will our children come to know as their story of America?

The people of India who have been trying to protect the Narmada River have a saying that goes “You can wake someone who is asleep, but you can not wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

Our stories must wake the people who are afraid and pretending to be asleep, and we can only do that through empathy, compassion and love ... not fear.

My friend Mary Evelyn Tucker writes that “what we seek (today) is a means for walking the ridge between the evident destruction and the emerging creativity of our times.”

As they say in AA, “our best thinking got us here.” I say let this be a time of great creativity, a time to give birth to new ideas, new relationships, new institutions. It is the occasion for each of us, in our own ways, to begin a journey to a new place. The poet laureate of Alaska, John Haines, wrote, “Every journey begins with a place to start from and something to leave behind.” Or if you prefer Bob Dylan, this is what he had to say on the matter: “Whoever isn’t busy being born is busy dying.”

Let’s leave behind our fear and our desire to adequately and compellingly describe the problem, and begin the journey of re-imagining a different future. Be patient, there is no road map for where we are today.

Some walls grow higher each year, it’s true. But others crumble down. Stories help us to take the steps toward one another and toward a new dream.

It’s our stories about people and place that help a great deal to crumble down the walls. The stories you tell about good relationships resonate with all humans more loudly, more courageously, and more joyfully than anything else we could ever legislate, negotiate or protect. These stories are the way we free ourselves from this culture of isolation to create an alternative culture of meaning and connection.

Thank you.

