

The Psychological Comforts of Storytelling

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When an English archaeologist named George Smith was 31 years old, he became enchanted with an ancient tablet in the British Museum. Years earlier, in 1845, when Smith was only a five-year-old boy, Austen Henry Layard, Henry Rawlinson, and Hormuzd Rassam began excavations across what is now Syria and Iraq. In the subsequent years they discovered thousands of stone fragments, which they later discovered made up 12 ancient tablets. But even after the tablet fragments had been pieced together, little had been translated. The 3,000-year-old tablets remained nearly as mysterious as when they had been buried in the ruins of Mesopotamian palaces.

An alphabet, not a language, cuneiform is incredibly difficult to translate, especially when it is on tablets that have been hidden in Middle Eastern sands for three millennia. The script is shaped triangularly (*cuneus* means “wedge” in Latin) and the alphabet consists of more than 100 letters. It is used to write in Sumerian, Akkadian, Urartian, or Hittite, depending on where, when, and by whom it was written. It is also an alphabet void of vowels, punctuation, and spaces between words.

Even so, Smith decided he would be the man to crack the code. Propelled by his interests in Assyriology and biblical archaeology, Smith, who was employed as a classifier by the British Museum, taught himself Sumerian and literary Akkadian.

In 1872, after the tablets had been sitting in the British Museum’s storage for nearly two decades, Smith had a breakthrough: The complex symbols were describing a story. Upon translating the 11th tablet, now widely regarded as the most important part of the story, Smith told a coworker, “I am the first person to read that after 2000 years of oblivion.” The U.K. Prime Minister at the time, William Gladstone, even showed up to a lecture Smith later gave on the tablets, whereupon an audience member commented, “This must be the only occasion on which the British Prime Minister in office has attended a lecture on Babylonian literature.”

The story on the 11th tablet that Smith had cracked was in fact the oldest story in the world: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh has all the trappings of a modern story: a protagonist who goes on an arduous journey, a romance with a seductive woman, a redemptive arc, and a full cast of supporting characters.

Humans have been telling stories for thousands of years, sharing them orally even before the invention of writing. In one way or another, much of people’s lives are spent telling stories—often about other people. In her paper “Gossip in Evolutionary Perspective,” evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar found stories’ direct relevance to humans: Social topics—especially gossip—account for 65 percent of all human conversations in public places.

Stories can be a way for humans to feel that we have control over the world. They allow people to see patterns where there is chaos, meaning where there is randomness. Humans are inclined to see narratives where there are none because it can afford meaning to our lives—a form of existential problem-solving. In a 1944 study conducted by Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel at Smith College, 34 college students were shown a short film in which two triangles and a circle moved across the screen and a rectangle remained stationary on one side of the screen. When asked what they saw, 33 of the 34 students anthropomorphized the shapes and created a narrative: The circle was “worried,” the “little triangle” was an “innocent young thing,” the big triangle was “blinded by rage and frustration.” Only one student recorded that all he saw were geometric shapes on a screen.

Stories can also inform people's emotional lives. Storytelling, especially in novels, allows people to peek into someone's conscience to see how other people think. This can affirm our own beliefs and perceptions, but more often, it challenges them. Psychology researcher Dan Johnson recently published a study in *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* that found reading fiction significantly increased empathy towards others, especially people the readers initially perceived as "outsiders" (e.g. foreigners, people of a different race, skin color, or religion).

Interestingly, the more absorbed in the story the readers were, the more empathetic they behaved in real life. Johnson tested this by "accidentally" dropping a handful of pens when participants did not think they were being assessed. Those who had previously reported being "highly absorbed" in the story were about twice as likely to help pick up the pens.

A recent study in *Science* magazine adds more support to the idea that stories can help people understand others, determining that literary fiction "uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences." That's to say, if you read novels, you can probably read emotions.

But why start telling stories in the first place? Their usefulness in understanding others is one reason, but another theory is that storytelling could be an evolutionary mechanism that helped keep our ancestors alive.

The theory is that if I tell you a story about how to survive, you'll be more likely to actually survive than if I just give you facts. For instance, if I were to say, "There's an animal near that tree, so don't go over there," it would not be as effective as if I were to tell you, "My cousin was eaten by a malicious, scary creature that lurks around that tree, so don't go over there." A narrative works off of both data and emotions, which is significantly more effective in engaging a listener than data alone. In fact, Jennifer Aaker, a professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, says that people remember information when it is weaved into narratives "up to 22 times more than facts alone."

The value humans place on narrative is made clear in the high esteem given to storytellers. Authors, actors, directors—people who spin narratives for a living are some of the most famous people in the world. Stories are a form of escapism, one that can sometimes make us better people while entertaining, but there seems to be something more at play.

Perhaps the real reason that we tell stories again and again—and endlessly praise our greatest storytellers—is because humans want to be a part of a shared history. What Smith discovered on that 11th tablet is the story of a great flood. On the 11th tablet—or the "deluge tablet"—of *Gilgamesh*, a character named Uta-napishtim is told by the Sumerian god Enki to abandon his worldly possessions and build a boat. He is told to bring his wife, his family, the craftsmen in his village, baby animals, and foodstuffs. It is almost the same story as Noah's Ark, as told in both the Book of Genesis and in the Quran's Suran 71.

Humans have been telling the same stories for millennia. Author Christopher Booker claims there are only seven basic plots, which are repeated over and over in film, in television, and in novels with just slight tweaks. There is the "overcoming the monster" plot (*Beowulf*, *War of the Worlds*); "rags to riches" (*Cinderella*, *Jane Eyre*); "the quest" (*Illiad*, *The Lord of the Rings*); "voyage and return" (*Odyssey*, *Alice in Wonderland*); "rebirth" (*Sleeping Beauty*, *A Christmas Carol*); "comedy" (ends in marriage); and "tragedy" (ends in death).

Helpful as stories can be for understanding the real world, they aren't themselves real. Is there such a thing as too much fiction? In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes writes of main character Alonso Quixano, "He read all night from sundown to dawn, and all day from sunup to dusk, until with virtually no sleep and so much reading he dried out his brain and lost his sanity ..."

The next morning, however, Alonso Quixano decided to turn himself into a knight. He changed himself into Don Quixote, deciding he would pave his own journey. Then he went off, "seeking adventures and doing everything that, according to his books, earlier knights had done."