

THE NARRATIVE MANIFESTO I

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The Battle of Narratives and the True Nature of the Revolution

The history of all hitherto existing society is *not* the history of class struggles, but instead the history of *narrative* struggles. Storytellers, from the creators of hieroglyphics to the inventors of alphabets to the perpetrators of gods and myths, gospels, wars, ideas, science, and *sura*, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open battle of narratives, a battle that each time ended either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of a old story that once held sway over entire populations and was thought to be true.¹

For these reasons, we must agree from the outset that this call to narrative engagement, this call to revolution and to the reconstitution of society is dangerous. Why dangerous? Because, in fact and in fiction, there is no more urgent call, no more magical spell, than the spells of well told stories and the irresistible call to identify with powerful narratives. And because the flip side of this call to reconstitute society through narrative engagement is the dire need for narrative accountability, or the right of every free thinking citizen to cry foul when her or his narrative space has been ruptured by bad stories, ideological distortions, misrepresentations and lies, and brazen stupidity try to pass for reasoned discourse and/or coherent narrative.

Dangerous, too, because the ability to tell a story well does not necessarily mean that the story you tell is true. Some of history's monsters were legendary storytellers. Some of today's most egregious violators of our narrative trust are themselves honey-tongued manipulators, talking heads, politicians, and terrorist leaders or spokespersons. And some of these narratives, such as call to martyrdom used to recruit children to the cause of jihad, strap lethal bombs on themselves in exchange for the promise of 72 virgins, and detonate those bombs and their bodies in crowded public spaces because they are told this is what Allah demands, are evidence enough of the enduring lure of powerful narratives and their very real danger.

But those of us who believe in the power of narrative to alter perceptions of reality, to change minds, and to influence choices of action do not dwell on the misuses of these

¹ This paragraph is intended to be read as a parody of and tribute to the opening paragraph in Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*.

powers of persuasion. It is not productive. Dwelling on the weakness of narrative's victims is no substitute for true narrative strength. We understand the problem. We must speak against it. But we do not stop our advocacy, our campaign for narrative engagement, because there is too much at stake. Instead, I post the requisite ethical and moral caution, you read it, and together we move on.

Consider yourself warned: Not only are compelling narratives dangerous, and narrative engagement with the violent ideological narratives of others dangerous, but also reading this *Manifesto* is dangerous. It is dangerous because it speaks the truth at a time when the battleground is already prepared, sides have already been chosen, and chaos and disorder are everywhere. The stakes have never been higher nor the fight more worthy.

Welcome, brave warrior, to the narrative revolution!

Let us begin this revolution, this reconstitution of society, with a statement of first principles. This *Manifesto* asserts, proudly, that we are, as Walter Fisher expresses it, *homo narrans* – humans as storytellers.² It is our ability to tell stories, and to make lives and cultures out of them, that separates us from all other animals. It is our singular skill in telling those stories that elevates some gifted storytellers, even those with foreign-sounding names, to the White House, while others who themselves may also aspire to high office or higher status or perhaps just a tenured professorship somewhere preferably not in the Midwest, don't realize their dreams.

This is because those less narratively-equipped among us, although they may be just as good-looking or have better gams, but are less able to invent rhetorical visions capable of inspiring listeners, less able to poetically organize and authentically deliver them—people who, for example, jot down talking points with felt markers on their palm—are those persons who are often and—let us not mince words here—unkindly considered to be dumb asses, by comparison.

Those who rise to *The Narrative Manifesto* do not suffer dumb asses gladly. We define as a common enemy the 29% of Americans who believe that a “hillbilly palmpilot”³ deserves a crack at the White House. Those 29% are no doubt dumb asses too.

But the dumb asses are right about one thing: We are living right now at the crossroads of a righteous narrative struggle for the very soul of America. It is being waged daily between those of us who believe that intelligent leadership enhanced by a credible and poetic narrative is preferable to leadership by inarticulate dumb asses. It is being waged daily by educators who believe that the future of the world depends on the stories we tell about what truly matters in life, about peace, about social justice, about the eradication of

² See Fisher, W. R. (1987). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

³ See the story: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/10/sarah-palin-hand-crib-notes-white-house>

poverty, disease, and ignorance, instead of the corrupt ideology of business schools and conservative Republicans that teach its students to value only greed, the accumulation of personal wealth, and the ruthless spirit of advanced absentee-owner capitalism that is spread through their evil textbooks and given public voice on Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal*.

This is the enemy who is near. This is the enemy who is also well financed. This is the enemy who is selling an old story that divides the world into those who believe in a literal interpretation of the Constitution and the Holy Bible, and those who maintain that these narratives must be understood within their historical contexts and with a clear view of the consequences that are entailed by a literal reading. They want to take our country back to the polite white values and lifestyle of the mid-18th century and, if possible, refight the Civil War. States rights, not Federal rights. No taxes on profits. No health care reform. No equality for women. No minimum wage, which is, of course, only another way of saying “wage slavery.” And so forth.

The near enemy wants to restore the Reagan Caliphate. The near enemy wants to abolish support for public education.

The near enemy is a real and present danger to our preferred American way of life. And this near enemy has a loud voice and controls big corporations, most of the votes in both political parties, and all of the conservative media. But make no mistake. The near enemy is, collectively, nothing less than the American Taliban.

And their narrative endorsing violent extremism is spreading. It’s not just the dumbasses in the 29% that we need to counter. It is their influence over the young, the future generations. For this battle of narratives is destined to be an enduring war and if you agree to be part of our revolution, know that it is dangerous and you are volunteering for the long haul.

Narratives, Fisher teaches us, must do two things well: they must “hang together” as narratives and they must “ring true” for audiences. Narrative probability and narrative fidelity are the cornerstones of narrative power. For too long the left—our left, the brothers and sisters of this revolution—failed both tests of narrative power. For too long, those of us who see the world differently than our enemies do have been divided among ourselves by allegiance to a diverse array of smaller stories and as a result have lost our way back to a common storyline.

Instead, ours has been a meandering multivocal political folktale teetering on the brink of narrative incoherence. It’s like an overreaching ambitious novel of American life that tries to be about everything and as a result becomes confusing and contentious, and as a result loses the interest of readers and listeners, which is what has happened.

We have also burdened our story with the theme of pride in our moral superiority. No one likes *hubris*. And—this is key—we have written our narrative of America—the land of hope and opportunity, of freedom and dreams—with an infinite sadness punctuated with dysfunctional Congressional defeat and the resulting public despair.

Tell me honestly, how is this version of our nation, much less our revolutionary mission at all narratively satisfying? It is not satisfying. It is boring. It's weak. It is a tale of woe. Of powerlessness. Of futility. We have become like the old drunk at the corner bar quoting Kennedy and King, Jr., that some people feel sorry for but no one is really listening to. Not anymore.

That left—the old guard left—had its narrative chance and blew it. It gave up on a great storyline for special interest politics and political correctness, neither of which made most Americans identify with the narrators or want to know what happens next. But it did make a lot of them turn the page. And open another book.

The lesson about narrative that we all first must learn begins with a question: Does our current tale of woe *hang together*? The answer is: No. There are too many small stories crowding out the larger narrative.

The second lesson also begins with a question: Does our tale of woe *ring true*? To answer that question I have to ask another, analogous one: *How many academics does it take to screw in a light bulb*? This very question was recently posted to a department email listserv by a colleague of mine, and I reprint below the responses he gave:

Answer: Well, that answer depends on one's theoretic perspective!

For example:

For an empiricist: At least three--one to screw it in and two others to assess intercoder reliability;

For an interpretivist: One would first need to know the social construction of what it means to screw in a lightbulb; for an ethnographer: S/he would sit in the dark to understand the culture of the room;

For an autoethnographer: S/he would sit in the dark, then write about her/his experience.

For a critical cultural person: Damn the hegemonic lightbulb company that has power over the means to see!

I had to add to it. So I wrote back a couple of small corrections to two of the entries:

For the ethnographer: S/he would sit in the dark waiting for an opportunity to interview the empiricist, the interpretivist, the autoethnographer, and the critical cultural person, meanwhile collecting notes about the culture of the dark room and wondering why some people insist on light, anyway . . .

For the autoethnographer: S/he would sit in the dark, then write about the experience, discovering along the way that s/he was the light bulb.

See the analogy? Of course you do. Our love of diverse theoretical orientations and methods has damned us academics to narrative incoherence. So, too, has our love of diverse causes damned the left to behave much as warring tribes behave in a civil war. We have been committed to our own cause so long that we believe we are the light bulb instead of remembering that it was—and is—our job to screw in the light bulb so that we bring light into the room.

For those who accept the challenge of *The Narrative Manifesto* it falls to us to find a way out of this dilemma, some way to collectively amass our diverse resources and locate a narrative capable of leading us, and the world, out of the dark room made darker every day by the enemies' creeping ignorance and greed that have brought on our economic, social, and institutional decay. We must find a common narrative that both hangs together and rings true, without requiring extended, competitive, conflicted, and hand-wringing debates over how we screw in a light bulb.

We have the power of narrative on our side. President Obama proved that. Against all odds he proved that the power of narrative can and does change history. But he cannot do it alone. Help him overcome the paralyzing fear and anxiety that was the cruel rhetorical method used by the previous administration to maintain their power and promote a binary vision of the world that defined America and the West as the cowboy Crusaders bent on once again conquering the world. That narrative fueled racial and religious differences at home and abroad. That narrative contributed nothing to the Gross National Product but increased by tenfold our debt, and our children's debt. That narrative failed to keep us safe or secure, for although the Bush dumb-asses like to gloss over it, 9/11 did occur on their watch. That narrative brought our economy, indeed the world's economy, to its knees while protecting the bonuses of criminal billionaires and their Harvard Business School lackeys. And then, Ta Da!, the gang that couldn't shoot straight became the party that gave us Sarah *Fucking* Palin as a serious candidate for the Vice Presidency of the United States?

Keith Oberman's rage has nothing on mine. If you are not yet angry, you are not a true brother or sister of *The Narrative Manifesto*. This is not a battle for passive aggressive liberals who hedge their bets, mute their anger, or fail to step up to the narrative battlefield. That sort of liberal is no longer credible, no longer worthy of the narrative paradigm.

Narratives about revolutions, about the reconstitution of society are dangerous, politically dangerous, and because they are dangerous they require writers and speakers, as well as those who would oppose them, to take risks. There are many ways to take risks with narratives, and not all of those risks, nor even necessarily the best ones, involve putting yourself,

or others, in harm's way. But some risks do. And that is the price of having let things go on badly for so long.

The enemy we know is the near enemy. That is the narrative wolf howling at the front door. But there is also a far enemy that threatens our way of life. That is the narrative constructed by violent extremists abroad. That is the narrative that most people on the left have conveniently ignored, or at least have allowed the far right to own. And own *badly*. It is the narrative wolf howling at our back door. And I am here to tell you that it is a powerful narrative that we can no longer afford to ignore.

This far enemy's narrative goes something like this:⁴ the world is corrupt and in chaos, and the nations of the Arab and Muslim world have fallen from the path of True Islam. These Arab and Muslim states exist in a state of pagan heresy or ignorance similar to what existed on the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Islam's birth, a state of *jahaliyya*. What is needed is a return to True Islam, a restoration of the Caliphate, and the imposition of rule by Sharia law. To do that, those who engage in holy *jihad* must first end the evil influences of the West and rid the land of the foreign occupiers—the American crusaders and their allies. To do that may require martyrdom.

Here are some questions everyone needs to ask about the far enemy's narrative: Why is it that the appeal of the Salafi and Wahhabi schools of thought, each preaching a return to the values and lifestyle of 7th century Islam, has grown enormously in popularity? How is it that otherwise ordinary law abiding Muslims identify with a social movement that defines as enemies of God not only all apostate leaders of Arab and Muslim nations, but also Christians and Jews as well as those who call themselves Muslims but who do not follow in the fundamentalist ways of the Salafi and Wahhabi creed? Or who learn to define their lives as meaningful only within a web of a significance tied to a return to the ummah and to a reinstatement of the Caliphate dissolved by Kemmal Ataturk in 1924?

Or, finally, what is it about their narrative, a global social narrative that defines the West, and particularly America, as the enemy, as the Crusader, as the evil that can only be eradicated by a holy *jihad*, so much so that the goal of this system of stories has been their recruitment into an ideological alliance with a cause that preaches the love of death and the inevitability of victory?

The reason the far enemy's narrative has potency is clear. It is because as a narrative it is coherent to those who hear it, it connects to a view of history they know and do not question, it offers them meaningful work—the work of Allah—and it contains a powerful message that not only rings true, but that also compels ideological identification, personal sacrifice, and extreme actions.⁵

⁴ Much of the substance and language of this narrative is drawn from Sebastien Gorka and David Kilcullen, "Who's Winning the Battle for Narrative? Al-Qaida versus the United States and its Allies," *Influence Warfare*. New York: Praeger, 2009.

⁵ This thesis is elaborated in Jeffrey Halverson, H. L. Goodall, Jr., and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamic Extremists*, forthcoming.

Ye who have lost all hope, enter here.

Ye who have a life, an education, a spouse, children, you, too, enter here.

This fidelity to a great cause, a righteous cause, is the basic appeal of the far enemy's narrative. It offers close personal identification for listeners and readers, and it asks what you will do, what you will personally contribute, to want to find out what happens next? It is, so far at least, better than our American narrative because our American narrative keeps changing. Is this a war fought for revenge against AQ for 9/11? Or is it about oil? Did we invade Iraq because there were weapons of mass destruction or because we thought Saddam Hussein was an evil dictator who threatened stability in the region? Has our presence there made the region more stable or has it been a destabilizing influence? And why are we now leaving Iraq to once again enter Afghanistan? Is it to finally get bin Laden or is it to end the rule of the Taliban? Is propping up a corrupt regime there that will likely fall as soon as we leave worth the investment of a billion or so dollars every day?

Why were we in Vietnam?

What are we doing in Afghanistan today?

You tell me. I've lost the narrative thread. But at least the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have figured out the fundamental problem. They say this: *Since we cannot kill our way to victory, we must win the battle of narratives.*

This is not just another campaign to win the hearts and minds, which is what we need to wage here at home against the narrative wolf at the front door. But for the far enemy, the wolf howling at our back door and all whom they would influence with their storyline worldwide, ours must be a campaign to win the hearts and *souls*.

One more observation. These two narrative wolves are connected. It's not America—the beautiful idea of it—that the jihadists hate. It is the hypocrisy and corruption and chaos of our policies. It is our inability or unwillingness to live up to our own ideals and values. Because of the narrative wolf at the front door, the narrative wolf at the back door has already morphed into the jihadi next door.⁶

This battle of narratives we find ourselves in today, and about which this *Manifesto* is written, is serious business and therefore requires some action. From *you*. This is not some theoretical academic hijinks about which you can sip your latte and just engage intellectually. No. This is the driven stuff

⁶ See Andrea Elliott, "The Jihadi Next Door," New York Times Magazine, January 31, 2010, available online at : <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/magazine/31Jihadist-t.htm>

of life. This is about power, passion, risk, and courage—to speak the narrative truth in story forms, to compel readers and listeners to want *find out what happens next*. And it is about holding the dumb-asses and the jihadis accountable for their narratives, and finding ways to intervene in their terrorist discourse, to disrupt it, to prevent it from being used to recruit children and young adults to their idiot ideology.

Are you ready to take some risks with your own narrative? To become dangerous?

Probably you are wondering what, exactly, I mean by that. For too long we citizens and academics have put up with a world of chaos and stupidity created by an addiction to bad stories, political lies, celebrity scandals, reality tv that is anything but real, and a mediated news circus that keeps us fat, ignorant, and thoroughly entertained. Perhaps we thought if we just did our jobs it would all go away. Or if we just raised our kids properly, that was enough. Or that someday, surely, as Bruce Springsteen once put it, a “savior would rise from these streets.”

But that hasn’t happened. Slowly we became more complicit with the spread of narrative mediocrity, less surprised by scandal and corruption, so much so that we have shown ourselves to be willing to half-way believe just about any nonsense. “These banks are too big to fail,” being one example. Or the story told by five members of the Supreme Court when they ruled that opening your wallet and opening your mouth are the same thing. Or that Sarah Palin, candidate for the second highest office in the land and a heartbeat away from the Presidency, could see Russia from her house in Alaska.

Are you not sick and tired of this assault on narrative fidelity? Are you not ready to join the revolution? Are you not ready to engage the dumb-asses and terrorists and turn this battle around?

Here is the 9-point action plan for those who would dare act on *The Narrative Manifesto*:

1. Purify your own narrative; eliminate the lies you can identify, the selfishness and self-interest that pollute both your soul and the soul of our nation, the corrosive elements in your own speech that work against a civil discourse.
2. Produce and consume only those narratives that matter to the future of the world.
3. Write and read as if your life depends on it.
4. Cultivate knowledge of the near and far enemies, learn their communication strategies and propaganda tactics, and whenever and wherever possible, resist and/or disrupt them.⁷
5. Hold everyone accountable for the stories they tell. Take the time to phone in complaints and write letters to the editor.

⁷ For one example, please see H. L. Goodall, Jr., and Seth Wiener (2008). Creating the right reality: Communication message strategies and the Republican party. *Cultural Studies—Critical Methodologies*, 8 (May 2008), 135-158.

6. Talk back to offensive political party organizers and religious zealots who invade your community.
7. Make civic responsibility your job.
8. Join civic responsibility with public scholarship and rethink your research agenda.
9. Cultivate a wider audience for your narratives and allies for your resistance work.