

Writing Better Stories

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I was recently asked to write a chapter in a new college textbook about why people find stories or narratives so appealing and persuasive and memorable. Many people over the ages have noticed that there is one thing that almost everyone likes, and that is a story. As children we want to listen to stories, and as adults we are still fascinated by stories, inspired by stories, scared by stories, amused by stories. We read stories, we watch them unfold on the movie screen, and we even write them and tell them ourselves. Some are true stories such as biographies and historical novels, some are completely fictitious, but it doesn't matter—we love stories.

And, in many respects our own lives are stories that we are writing as we go through life. Have you ever noticed that if someone asks you to tell them about yourself, what you say starts to sound like a story?

Imagine that we are going to write a story, a captivating story, a wildly imaginative story, one almost beyond belief. Right now, right here, we are going to write a story. This story, like many good stories, will force readers to grapple with serious issues. It will place believable characters in positions of unbelievable responsibility. But, this story must also be interesting enough to capture the attention of the even the most jaded reader. The plot, therefore, must be absolutely captivating. What should we write about?

Let me suggest a plot line to get us started. Let's try a science fiction story. I like science fiction and even teach a class on it at Hope College. In this story let's start with a French race car driver, photographer and rock singer—one person, not three. One night in 1973, following a race in an exotic Latin American country, he decides to take a jog around an inactive volcano. His name is Claude Verilhon. Claude sees in the distance a brilliant light. Moving toward the light, he observes something incredible—a small flying saucer just about to land. Out of the saucer emerges a man, about 4 feet tall and wearing a green jumpsuit. He is, we say in our story, an alien from outer space.

This alien tells Claude that he is to take a message of peace to the entire world. He gives Claude a new name—Rael, which the alien says means messenger in Hebrew, but which Hebrew scholars will later say the name means nothing in Hebrew. Claude, or Rael, claims that he has also been told that by the alien about the true origins of the human race: The original humans, it turns out, were cloned on another planet, and sent to earth to populate it.

Our photographer/race car driver/ rock singer is commanded by his alien friends to start a new religion among humans, a religion based on the message of peace, and the great truth about our origin as clones. The goal of this new religion is not just to make sure this truth is known, but also to raise money to assist human cloning efforts, which will eventually allow the human race to advance to the stage the aliens have already achieved. Rael job is to discover among the human population scientists who will assist with the cloning project. With great modesty, Rael names his new religion after himself, and so his 56,000 followers worldwide are called the Raelians. He places a woman named Brigitte in charge of his cloning laboratory, which he names CloneAid. It is first

established in an abandoned school in West Virginia, where it is eventually discovered, and Rael is made to testify before Congress by the Food and Drug Administration to explain his strange cloning experiments. He is forced to stop.

What happens next in our story? His first attempts at human cloning a failure, Rael must look for scientist better than Brigitte to conduct his experiments, and a place safer than West Virginia. He receives word that a suspicious Italian obstetrician—let's call him Severino Antinori—has begun his own experiments that will, Antinori claims, lead to successful human cloning. However, Antinori lacks the money necessary to set up the kind of laboratory needed to conduct his cloning experiments. Ah, but Rael has, through his new religion, which by 1999 has attracted 56,000 followers world, managed to acquire vast wealth, enough wealth, in fact, to fund Antinori.

The two men team up, the French UFO religionist seeking human clones, and the Italian scientist seeking fame and fortune by being the first man to clone a human being. Governments in Europe get word from the US that Antinori's mad experiments, funded by Rael and Clonaid, are going forward. Antinori announces to the world that he will clone a human being by October of 2001.

Now our story needs a hero. In this case the hero is a famous government official from Belgium, who convinces the leaders of the newly formed European Union to pass laws making Antinori's experiments illegal. However, Antinori, with Raelian UFO cult money, says he will simply purchase a ship and conduct his experiments offshore in the Mediterranean Ocean.

October of 2001 comes and goes, and the world hears little of Antinori or Rael. Then, suddenly, without warning, Antinori emerges in an exotic location in March of

2002, let's say, a small Middle Eastern country such as the United Arab Emirates. He holds a press conference and announces that a female volunteer with whom he is working is already eight weeks pregnant with the first cloned human being. The world is left to ponder whether he could possibly be telling the truth. Will the Raelians succeed in cloning a human being? Will Antinori, the alleged mad scientist of the cloning world, be the first to create human life in a test tube?

But, you say, that story is just too far out. OK, then here's another plot line. Let's bring things down to earth. No more science fiction. How about an international thriller featuring spies, terrorists, and fabulously wealthy, incredibly evil geniuses. A cliff hanging thriller that puts James Bond in the shade. Let's begin in 1930 when a destitute immigrant arrives in Saudi Arabia and begins working as a porter carrying luggage for wealthy families. This porter gets word that King of Saudi Arabia, the head of the royal house of Saud, has demanded that a road to be built straight across the Arabian desert that would connect his home directly to his villa by the sea. He is, after all, tired of the three-day journey across the dessert, part of it on camel back, to get to his villa. Engineers from Europe and America are hurriedly brought in, but they study the problem and tell the King that it is impossible to build such a road across the endless sands of the Arabian peninsula.

The King is furious, and offers wealth and fame to anyone who will build his road. The lowly porter, now the owner of a small construction company, approaches the King and claims that he will build the desired road. The King's engineers sneer and laugh, but the King is impressed with the man's confidence, and allows him to attempt

the impossible. In a matter of a few months, the former porter has, in fact, build the King his road.

So grateful is the King that he gives the man exclusive rights to build roads in Saudi Arabia, making him a billionaire. This billionaire marries, in fact he marries 10 wives. He has children, in fact, fifty-four of them. They are all raised in extravagant luxury. The seventeenth child, a boy, is tall, handsome, and brilliant. His father sends him to Alexandria, Egypt, to be educated. Let's say he attends the same Egyptian University as the great actor Omar Sharif. He learns English, and begins to travel. A young man with lots of money and no responsibilities, he lives the irresponsible life of an international playboy, jetting from one country to another in search of new pleasures.

But, our plot now thickens. In 1968 the porter turned billionaire construction magnate dies. His young handsome son acquires an enormous inheritance, perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars. He takes an interest in world politics, and becomes angered at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a Muslim nation. With training from the American Central Intelligence Agency he gathers a force of fighters from various Arab nations and transports and arms them with his own money to fight in Afghanistan. To the shock of the entire world, his small but highly committed and well-trained militia known as the Afghan Arabs actually succeeds in defeating the Soviet army. The Soviet Union itself soon collapses under the weight of military expenditures and public outrage over losses in the Afghan war.

But, there is more to know about this war in Afghanistan, a war in which our rich kid turned warrior actually leads many assaults on Soviet forces. During one offensive against the Soviets a mortar shell lands in his foxhole, right at his feet. But,

miraculously, it does not explode. He concludes that Allah has preserved his life so that he can lead the Islamic world back to complete unity so as to drive out the imperial Western powers and their corrupting influences. He turns his sights on the United States. “From this mountain,” he boasts from his wilderness hideout, “we destroyed the Soviet Union, and next we will destroy the United States.”

And next in our story, he sets out to do just this. But how? In an apparently insane attempt to plunge the world into a devastating war between a Western world united against terrorists and a Middle East newly united against the Western world, our villain—let’s give him an appropriately sinister name such as Osama—recruits nineteen suicide soldiers who, as impossible as it seems, successfully commandeer four American commercial aircraft at the same time on the same morning in September of 2001.

But now the plot of our story becomes just too incredible to believe, for these nineteen men, armed only with box cutters and fake bombs, succeed in flying two giant aircraft into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, bringing both towers to the ground in less than an hour. A third plane is successfully guided into the Pentagon itself on the very same morning, causing extensive damage. But, the victories can’t be all on one side in this story. On the fourth plane, several brave heroes led by a gay American rugby player overpower the team of hijackers and crash the plane and themselves into a field in Pennsylvania.

As a consequence of these terrorist actions, America itself, the world’s greatest super power, goes to war in Afghanistan of all places, driving out the entire terrorist network established by Osama, which he dubbed Al Qaida, that has come to rule the country and use it as a base of operations. But, incredibly, Osama escapes an extensive

international search launched when an American President from Texas, who has said, “I want him dead or alive.” And, we still don’t know if he is dead or alive.

As you already know, as incredible as the second story sounds, it is all too true. A novelist of the abilities of Tom Clancey could not have written a more riveting plot, and we are still living in the pages of that book. The first story about Rael and Severino Antinori, however, is also true. Severino Antinori just two weeks ago announced that he has succeeded in implanting a cloned human embryo in the womb of a female volunteer, and much of his funding has come from the Raelian UFO cult founded by the French photographer and racing aficionado, Claude Verilhon, also known as, Rael.

Here is my point in relating these events as if they were fictional. The world you are, within the next twenty years, going to take charge of as leaders in education, business, government, religious organizations, service agencies, and the military, is a world desperately in need of direction from people committed to the ideals of the National Honor Society, the ideals of Scholarship, Leadership, Service, and Character. The stories that world is already generating are, were they to be cast as fiction, too improbable to be true, too nightmarish to be imagined occurring in the real world. And yet, they are the true stories of the world you are inheriting from your elders, and there is not evidence that the world’s stories are getting any more plausible, or any less nightmarish, as time passes. So, what does the world most need? Perhaps each of us would have his or her own best answer to that question. But, I think that one thing we need is leaders who possess the values espoused by the National Honor Society. Let’s consider each of them briefly.

Scholarship. And why scholarship in a leader? Because you must know much, and know it well, in order to provide the world with much needed direction. So, continue to study and study hard. The people working against the creation of a peaceful and progressive and sane world will, you can count on it, be studying very hard as well. The Isomers and Antinoris of the world also study hard. You must study harder, for you must know a great deal to provide this crisis-weary world with direction out of the dark.

Leadership, because someone will have to point the way. It takes boldness to lead, knowledge to lead, and a deep concern for people. So, be leaders. I sometimes challenge my students with this question: Why are you in college? I get a lot of answers, like—so that I can get a good job, so that I can be prosperous, and, I don't know. I then say, Have you ever thought that you might be in college to prepare yourself to be a morally grounded leader in our society? Silence usually follows, but I am completely serious. My guess is that you are all intending to go on to college, and most of you will also do graduate work. Please, set as your goal to be leaders, but good leaders.

Service. Yes, for the mark of a truly great leader is a willingness to serve others. Otherwise, leadership degenerates into the dangerous egotism and pride that has led to some of the world's recent catastrophes. I could have told a third story of an ambitious man who, with a couple of partners, comes to the place of controlling the energy supply for the entire western United States through their company known as Enron.

But let me turn to a different narrative. This one involves a young girl named Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, born in Skopje, Macedonia on August 27, 1910. At the age of 12 she decided she was being called by God to serve the poor. At the age of 18 she left her parents' home and traveled to Ireland to receive training to be a missionary. She

joined the order of the Sisters of Loreto, and was sent to India in 1928. She became the principal of a Catholic high school. In 1946 she contracted tuberculosis, and was sent to the mountain city of Darjeeling to recuperate. On that train ride she decided that she must serve the poor and dying of Calcutta, and in 1946, with no funds to start the project, Agnes began an open air school for street urchins in the city. She received permission to leave her convent, and devoted herself to working full time with the poor in Calcutta's slums. Volunteers joined her helpers, financial support was eventually provided, and in 1950 she began her own order called the "The Missionaries of Charity." Today the order has more than a thousand brothers and sisters working to care for the poor just in India, and has spread around the world. Many of her followers have now been trained as doctors and nurses. And we are more familiar with Agnes by the name she received—Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

What can an 18 year old with a vision of service to others accomplish? A great deal. We need more such leaders—so make it you aim to be one, a leader willing to serve others.

Which brings me to **character**. Let me ask you this: Who are your heroes? Who do you want most to be like? What kind of people do you like being around? Are they honest people? Courageous people? Compassionate people? Humble people? I hope so, for these are also likely to be people of high moral character, and the world needs more of them in positions of leadership.

When you go home this afternoon, I want to ask you to do three things. They won't take long. You expected a homework assignment from a professor, right. First, make a list of the five or six people you admire most in the world. Make sure at least two

or three of them are people you know personally. Second, after each name, write down the qualities you admire in these people. Look at your list and see if these are the character traits you want others to see in you. Third, ask yourself what you think high moral character is made up of. Write a definition of it. And then, make that your goal.

We have less control over the events of our lives than we may think, but we do have some control over the kind of people we become. Set your goal for personal moral character as high as you can, and then live up to it in every decision you make.

I started out by asking you to imagine writing a story. The two stories I suggested to you are, unfortunately, true. I can guarantee you that you will be an important character in quite a few important stories as you go through life. What kind of stories will these be? That is up to you. Make it your goal to be the kind of person who can help the world to write better stories in the future.