IDEA 4

THE ART OF THE STORY

Telling Your Story, Owning Your Narrative

Let's Begin with a Story

There are plenty of materials on the market devoted to the importance of using story in business, branding, organizational management, healing, education and personal transformation. But there are very few materials that actually explain how to construct an effective story. This presentation explores this topic in depth. So, without further delay, let me tell you a story. Afterwards we will discuss what made the story work, and then examine the three levels of story structure that permeate the narrative world: the story arc, the story core, and the mechanics of story motion.

Once upon a time there was a young man named William Tell. No, not that William Tell. A newer, more networked William Tell. He is the hero of my novel, *Then What?,* about finding a path with a heart in a world that is unnaturally overwhelmed by the unrelenting influx of iStuff. The novel begins with William assuming the helm of one of the world's largest financial sector computer networks at the mere, mid-adolescent age of sixteen. It was a time in his life when managing the information infrastructure of thirty-somethings just so they could afford their yacht payments felt like a huge distraction from the far more important goal of extricating himself from the existential angst posed by acne and advancing puberty. The fluke of events that propelled him to his position of preeminence are too detailed to describe here. However, it would be accurate to say that they consisted of the kinds of tawdry tabloid titillations that we'll never get used to but we just can't get enough of. Once the scandal dust had settled, and the tainted had fled, there stood William, the only one left in the IT department who had enough know-how to keep the vast network humming.

In this vignette from the book, it is five years later. We find William Tell on stage in the corporate auditorium during the

company's annual Family Picnic Day. It's the same gig every year. The spouses, children, aunts and uncles of the company employees come to the corporate campus to drink stale cola knock offs, eat hamburgers on mushy white buns and watch whatever dog and pony show the corporation has created to entertain its guests.

This year William Tell has fashioned quite a spectacle. He spent the last ten months crafting the company's brand new, mega media, interactive, immersively hyper-linked, socially mediated, artificially intelligent website, and the family members were going to be the first to see it. He had reserved the great unveiling just for them.

However, as he stood on stage behind an oak lectern pecking away on his keyboard, a big problem was unraveling behind him. Although he could see the new website just fine on his laptop, all he could see on the two-story auditorium display that filled the back of the stage was a huge buzzing nothing. In his profession it was known as "the blue screen of death."

As audience members waited for William's new creation to appear, they became more fidgety by the moment, raising the din in the dimly lit auditorium to intolerable decibels. After all, they weren't executive types who brought a sense of corporate decorum to these kinds of events. No, no. They were kids hopped up on soda pop laced with high fructose corn syrup, screeching as they played first-person shooter games on their smart phones. They were socialites who hadn't seen each other since the last cocktail party, who were anxious to check in on who got what in the latest divorce settlements, and whether their kids had outscored each other on the SATs. As they trash talked their way through William's public mortification, they wondered whether they should cash in their stock options now, before it was too late.

William frantically pressed control this and control that. He reset every software app and reconnected every cord.

Nothing worked. Despite his best efforts to remain calm, he was perspiring so profusely that the sweat was rolling down between his body and his clothes, collecting in his shoes, making them slosh whenever he moved. He looked out into the audience and saw a row of adolescent boys with their baseball caps turned sideways who were chanting, "Loser, loser." He heard a woman in the front row say, "Well, Madge, let's go get ourselves a drink. No wonder Harold didn't get a bonus this year with bozos like this driving the bus."

As he listened to the audience grow hecklier and hecklier, he knew he had to act. He walked up to the microphone, cleared his throat and was on the verge of admitting his failure when a little girl, perhaps twelve years old, sporting pig tails and wearing thick-rimmed coke-bottle glasses, ran up to the edge of the stage and whispered, "Pssst! Pssst! Mr. Tell! If you hit Escape F12 three times, you'll reroute the video signal through the second com port and it'll come up just fine. Just another Windows bug. Yeah, you probably downloaded the patch from last night to fix the other bugs from the patch before that. Well, snap! That patch had bugs in it too and the patch this morning fixes the patch from last night. So you can go get the patch or for now just hit Escape F12 three times. Works like a charm."

William, just twenty-one years old, wondered, "How does somebody this young know all this stuff?"

But mostly he was focused on the indignity of the situation. Here he was, Chief Network Officer of one of the largest financial sector computer networks in the world, unable to load a webpage in front of an audience of parents and kids, and up walks a little girl who offers him tech support. There was absolutely no way he was going to take her advice. Self-respect simply wouldn't allow it. He looked down at her from his perch behind the lectern and muttered, "I'm a little busy right now."

"It's that old triple-encrypted BIOS," she sing-songed. "It'll get you every time. Do you need the patch? You can download

it or just hit Escape F12 three times.'"

"Yes," he interrupted her. "I heard you." He kept clacking away on his keyboard and checking his connections, burying himself deeply in the conviction that there was no way a little girl was going to tell him how to debug this moment in public.

"Hey, Mr. Tell, I might have the patch on my smart phone. Want me to zap it to you? 'Got Blue Tooth?'"

William watched an entire row of people near the back of the auditorium get up and shuffle toward the exit. All he could make out in their cacophony of cackles was an elderly woman saying, "I feel sorry for the boy. I hope he can keep his job. I've got a grandson in third grade who might be able to help. Should I call him?"

Suddenly he noticed a Barbie doll peeking out from within the folds of the little girl's cotton jumper. He swore it winked at him. It was the kind of off-kilter moment that made him wonder if he was really dreaming. He began to pray he was. The little girl noticed him staring and laughed. "I carry it around so people think I'm just another normal little girl. I turned her eyes into augmented reality cameras with 5-megabit connections. By the way, I hacked into your wireless system here. Piece of cake. I can show you how to plug that leak if you want. Anyway, back to your projector. Escape F12 three times. It'll work, honest. Why won't you just try it!?"

William looked down at the little girl, out at the crowd that was near mutiny, and back down at her. Somewhere in his subconscious he was wondering, why won't I just try it? What's my problem? With the sweat filling his shoes and the psychic tectonic plates grinding away in his soul, finally, in one fluid motion he hit Escape F12 three times and the web page triumphantly filled the auditorium screen! The audience erupted in applause. The adolescent boys with their hats turned sideways hooped and stomped their feet. The little girl hollered, "Atta boy, Mr. Tell! I knew you could do it!" William lifted

her on stage and thanked her profusely. Barbie broadcast the moment on YouTube, where it was sure to go viral. And from then on, whenever he needed help with his computer, William Tell asked the computer club at the local elementary school to give him a hand.

The end.

Inside vs. Outside Stories

I tell you this story with all of its lack of subtlety so that we can deconstruct it and I can make a few points about how stories work.

To do this, let's back up and suppose that the problem had been that the cord between the computer and the projector hadn't been properly connected. William Tell plugged it in, and everything worked just fine. Would we have a story? No, because we wouldn't have the rising and falling action and the tension-resolution that a good story needs. Having a problem with the cord might kick-start the story if the cord had been broken, and the president of the corporation was rushing from the airport following a turbulent overseas flight just to see William present the new website, and there was only one other cord in the city, and William managed to get it just in the nick of time as the president took his seat in the front row. But just reconnecting a cord is too ordinary, and stories aren't told about ordinary events. Even the movie *Ordinary People* was about events that were extraordinary to the people who lived them.

What if William had willingly accepted the girl's advice, pressed Escape F12 three times enthusiastically, and solved his problem? Would we have a story? No, because we would be missing the absolute crux of what makes a good story work: transformation.

Let's explore transformation in depth because it is key to what makes narrative work. The story is off to a good start. It has a compelling problem, which a story needs in order

181