

STORYTELLING IN CIVIC AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

A DRAFT CHAPTER ON LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING FOR
THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
POLITICAL AND CIVIC LEADERSHIP
STEPHEN DENNING
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Introduction

This chapter examines the role of storytelling in leadership. It looks at why storytelling is important, what are the elements that determine the effectiveness of a leadership story, what kinds of stories are effective for different leadership purposes, what are the pitfalls in the use of storytelling as a leadership tool and the likely future of storytelling for political and civic leadership.

THE THEORY OF LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING

1. WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Leadership involves inspiring people to act. Generally it involves inspiring people to change, and to want to do things differently from what they would otherwise do them. In some cases, it involves inspiring people to stick to a course in the face of obstacles when they are tempted to falter. In all cases, it entails inspiring people to act.

Leadership is thus not merely the holding of a position, but a way of behaving that causes people not only to act differently but to want to act differently. Leaders differ from office holders who serve merely as managers or caretakers, i.e. people who accept the goals that are given and pursue those goals with whatever hierarchical tools that have available for the accomplishment of those goals.

In leadership, both actions and words are important. Leading by example is a key facet of leadership. What leaders **say** is also important, as is the **congruence** of what leaders say and do. If leaders say one thing and do another, the dissonance generates distrust and undermines their effectiveness as leaders.

The communication tools at a leaders' disposal include facts, abstract generalizations, reasons, arguments, analyses, questions, metaphors, challenges, threats, warnings, commands, images and stories.

When political and civic leaders inspire people to want to do things differently, there is usually less emphasis on adversarial modes of communication such as commands, controls, threats, and warnings and more emphasis on collaborative methods of communication including facts, reasons, arguments, analyses, questions, metaphors, images and stories.

The focus of this chapter is the role of storytelling in leadership.

2. THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN LEADERSHIP

Storytelling is among the more effective of the communication tools at the disposal of political and civic leaders.

Throughout human history, storytelling has been important as a leadership tool for changing people's minds and sparking great movements of change.¹ The great religions have been built, and the great wars have been launched, using story as the principal communications tool. That's because stories tend to be more interesting and fresh than abstract argument. Stories fit the way people think. Story weaves in emotion in a way that rational argument can never do. Moreover, narrative is integral to the way we make decisions. Rather than making decisions by careful intellectual effort or following cues, human beings make most of their conscious decisions through narrative. We cannot decide what to do until we decide what story or stories we see ourselves as living.² If political and civic leaders are to change the way people think and act, they have to change those stories.

Nevertheless, the recognition of the role of storytelling in leadership is a relatively recent phenomenon. Theorists in the fields of leadership, communications and persuasion have had a hard time accepting that simple narratives could be apter to get action than reasoned argument.

The contemporary interest in leadership storytelling has coincided with the recognition of a growing need for leadership, and the realization of the limited effectiveness of traditional modes of communication for accomplishing its goals. The emergence of vast challenges such as global warming, the increasing globalization of the economy, the accelerating pace of change, the consequent imperative for ever faster innovation, the emergence of global networks of partners, the rapidly growing role of intangibles, which can't be controlled like physical goods, the increasing ownership of the means of production by

knowledge workers, the escalating power of customers in the marketplace, and the burgeoning diversity in both the workplace and marketplace—all these forces imply a vastly more important role for real leadership—and storytelling—now and in the future. Storytelling is one of the few rhetorical tools able to generate the passion needed to win active support for the actions needed to deal with such deep, pervasive and rapid changes.

3. THE WORTH OF THE LEADER'S CHANGE IDEA

In assessing the role of storytelling in leadership, it is helpful to keep an eye on the worth of the change idea. The more worthwhile the idea, the more likely a story is to inspire enthusiasm for it. Even powerful storytelling cannot rescue a bad idea.

The ideas promoted by leaders fall into three broad categories:

There are goals that are inherently worthwhile and ethical, such as ensuring universal health care for the entire population of a country.

Then there are instrumental goals, such as becoming more efficient as an agency, or introducing a new technology into a department.

And there are goals of questionable worth, such as the goal of unilaterally “reinterpreting” the Geneva Convention so as to permit interrogation techniques like water-boarding.

The more worthwhile the idea, the easier it is to communicate in a story. It is important to keep in mind that story is a two-edged sword. It enables people to see the implications of the idea. Hence if it is a bad idea, then story may bring that out too.

Thus attempts were made by the administration of President George W. Bush to justify its approach to the interrogation of suspected terrorists through stories that invited listeners to imagine the risk of not finding out from a terrorist that some massive terrorist attack was about to occur. Such stories were eventually trumped by counter-stories, that showed that the actual use of water-boarding hadn't involved such situations, that the information obtained by such methods was in any event unreliable, that the “reinterpretation” of the Geneva Convention invited enemies to do likewise, as well as highlighting the moral horror, and legal untenability, of practicing cruel and unusual punishment.

THE METHODS OF LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING

TYPES OF STORIES FOR LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING

GENERIC VS INDIVIDUAL PROTAGONISTS

An important choice for leaders in crafting a story is whether to use generic protagonists or individual protagonists for their story.

Here, for instance, is President John F. Kennedy towards the end of his Inaugural Address of January 20, 1961 telling a story aimed at persuading listeners to tackle the big global challenges of tyranny, poverty, disease and war. He used generic protagonists.

Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe. Now the trumpet summons us again not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are; but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, 'rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation,' a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.³

Here is President Ronald Reagan in his first Inaugural Address telling story with a similar message, but this time telling the story from the perspective of a single individual:

Under one such marker lies a young man—Martin Treptow—who left his job in a small town barber shop in 1917 to go to France with the famed Rainbow Division. There, on the western front, he was killed trying to carry a message between battalions under heavy artillery fire.

We are told that on his body was found a diary. On the flyleaf under the heading, "My Pledge," he had written these words: 'America must win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.'

The crisis we are facing today does not require of us the kind of sacrifice that Martin Treptow and so many thousands of others were called upon to make. It does require, however, our best effort, and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe

in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us.

Reagan's story is an example of what has been called a springboard story, i.e. a true story that springs a listener to a new level of understanding and sparks action.⁴

By using a single individual as the protagonist of his story, Reagan avoided the phenomenon of psychic numbing: i.e. the more people you have in the story, the less interested the listeners are likely to be.⁵ It's easier for an audience to identify and empathize with a single individual.

PAST VS FUTURE STORIES

Since leadership is about changing the future, it is often assumed that leadership stories will be stories about the future. And indeed some successful instances can be found, such as Churchill's 1940 speech telling a future story of the British people, "we will fight on the beaches", or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech.

Nevertheless, it is actually quite difficult to get a skeptical audience to buy into a future story that is different from their current context.

If you are a poet with the linguistic skills of Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King, a brilliantly told future story may be a viable option.

But for leaders without those linguistic skills, there are alternatives. One is for leaders to tell a story about the past and let the listener imagine the future. This is why a springboard story is so powerful, as in the story told by Ronald Reagan about Martin Treptow. A story about the past can thus spark a new story about the future in the mind of the listener. It's the listener who does the hard work of imagining the future.

The second alternative is to embed the future story in a sequence of positive stories that induce the listeners to be willing to imagine a different future. This is the sequence of stories that many political leaders have used so successfully for millennia, i.e. the story of who we have been >> the story of who we are >> the story of who we are going to be. The audience is primed for positive thinking. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as discussed below is an example.

TRUE VS FICTIONAL STORIES

Political and civic leaders tend to use true stories, rather than fictional stories. There are few fables like the business examples, *Who Moved My Cheese* or novels like Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. True stories are easier to believe and more difficult to satirize.

DIRECT VS INDIRECT STORIES

In **direct** stories, the storyteller formulates a story that explains the situation in which listeners find themselves. Thus in the Jewish religion, there are many stories to the effect that the Jewish people are "the chosen people of God." In the USA, stories of the creation of a great democracy by the so-called Founding Fathers are promulgated throughout the education and political system. Less beneficently, stories to the effect that "the country is under threat from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction" were used to justify the launching of the Iraq war in 2003.

A direct narrative transports the listener to another world. To get the story to stick, substantial financial resources, coordination with multiple storytellers and exercise of power may be needed. There is also a tendency to exaggerate in order to make the story "stick".

By contrast, an **indirect** narrative is told not so much to transport the listener to another world, but rather to spark a new story in the mind of the listener. The presenter's story is deliberately crafted to be less than all-absorbing: the idea is that the listeners not only hear the presenter telling the story, they also hear their own silent voices within, as their minds ponder the implications of an analogous story for their own lives.

The Biblical parables are examples of indirect narratives. In a parable, the interest of the story isn't in the story per se: the characters are not richly drawn. The events are described sketchily. The teller makes no effort to transport the listeners to a different world by evoking the sights and the sounds and the smells of the context so that the listeners return to their own world emotionally scarred by the experience. Instead, the object is to spark a new story in the mind of the listener about a similar issue that the listener may be facing.

Similarly, Ronald Reagan's story about Martin Treptow is an indirect narrative: it's not a "well-told story", with a highly developed plot and

all the sights and sounds and smells of the context in which the story took place. Instead, the story serves as a springboard, a point of departure for new stories that the listeners will generate in their own minds, from their special contexts, from their own experience. What is memorable for the listeners on such a journey isn't the storyteller's story but rather the virtual journey that they make of their own accord with the story they tell themselves.

FORMAL VS INFORMAL STORIES

Although most of the recorded stories told by leaders (including those cited in this chapter) are from formal speeches, informal storytelling is an important aspect of leadership. In an informal conversation, the give-and-take between leader and listeners enables the leader to know what they are really interested in, and so can direct stories to those concerns, rather than in a formal speech, where the leader has to guess what those concerns might be.

4. PERFORMANCE OF THE STORY

An important aspect of leadership storytelling concerns the physical things that leaders do with their bodies when they are telling their story.

Body language trumps words. If leaders are able to project their energy so that it energizes others, and so that their thinking, feeling, verbal messages, and bodily movements are all congruent, that can hugely reinforce what they are trying to communicate. If their body language contradicts what we are saying, it will undermine the intended message.

Why is body language so important? One reason is that listeners are acutely aware of the slightest bodily cues a speaker gives, wittingly or unwittingly, and can infer immediately what they mean. Thus when President George H. W. Bush glanced at his watch in the middle of a presidential debate in 1992, viewers immediately jumped to the conclusion that Bush wanted the debate to be over. By contrast if a leader believes in a cause intensely, then this will shine through in the story. As the musician and scholar, Bernice Johnson Reagan, says:

*"You don't have to be rich and you don't have to be an army. If you find yourself in a situation that needs to be changed, if you're willing to offer your life for it, you might actually get something done."*⁶

Whatever leaders communicate through their body language will speak louder than their spoken words: listeners will conclude that the body language is what the speaker really feels and means, even if the words are saying something else.

APPLICATIONS OF STORYTELLING FOR POLITICAL AND CIVIC LEADERSHIP

Although storytelling can be a powerful leadership tool, it's important to recognize that most stories are not useful for leaders: most stories do not change people's minds or lead to different actions. In particular, the widely held assumption that the more elaborated the story, the more effective it will be is likely to lead to counter-productive results.⁷

Making effective use of storytelling as a leadership tool entails understanding which types of stories are effective and why.

1. STORIES THAT SPARK CHANGE

A central use of storytelling for political and civic leaders is the use of springboard stories, i.e. true stories about the past that inspire action in the future. The story by Ronald Reagan about Martin Treptow is an illustration of this approach in action. Springboard stories tend to be told in a minimalist fashion, without much elaboration. The goal is not to transport a listener to another world, but rather to spark a new story in the mind of the listener.

Another example of springboard stories can be found in Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*. In telling the story of the success in repairing the hole in the ozone layer by concerted international action, it doesn't try to tell a well-told story. The story is told in a minimalist style. It may nevertheless succeed if it sparks a new story in the mind of the listener: "We solved the problem of the hole in the ozone layer, so maybe we can solve the problem of global warming!"

As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama also used such stories to win support for his change agenda. Here is an illustration from his speech at the Jefferson-Jackson dinner in Richmond Virginia on February 9, 2008:

"For while Washington is consumed with the same drama and divisions and distraction, another family puts up a 'For Sale' sign in their front yard. Another factory shuts its doors forever. Another mother declares bankruptcy because she couldn't pay her child's medical bills. And another soldier waves goodbye as

he leaves on another tour of duty in a war that should have never been authorized and should have never been waged. And it goes on and on and on. And we become cynical. We conclude this is the best we can do. We turn away from politics. Our standards become low. But in this election, at this moment, Americans are standing up, all across the country, to say: 'Not this time! Not this year! The stakes are too high. And the challenges are too great to play the same old Washington game, with the same old Washington players, and expect a different result.' People want to turn the page. They want to write a new chapter in American history."

The stories are minimalist in style: their aim is not to immerse listeners in the details of the narratives being told but rather to inspire new stories in the mind of the listeners that spark action.

2. STORIES THAT COMMUNICATE WHO YOU ARE

Personal stories can help establish trust in a leader. Such stories typically deal with how the speaker dealt with adversity in his or her life. Here is an example from Barack Obama, again from the speech at the Jefferson-Jackson dinner in February 2008:

I was born to a teen mum. My dad left me when I was two. I was raised by my single mum and my grandparents. They didn't have a lot of money. They didn't have a lot of status. They could give me love and education and hope.

*And so I put hope on my signs. I spoke about hope at the Democratic convention. I wrote a book called *The Audacity of Hope*. But I need to explain to people that hope is not blind optimism. Hope is not ignorance of the challenges that lie before us. I know how hard it will be to provide health care to everybody. Then insurance and the drug companies are not going to give up their profits easily. I know how hard it will be to change our energy policy. Exxon-Mobil made \$11 billion this last quarter. I know how hard it is to live in poverty, that's built up over generations. I know how hard it is to make sure that we're lifting up our schools, because it's not just going to involve teachers, it's not just going to involve administrators: it will involve parents and communities changing our mindset about our children.*

I know these things because I have fought on the streets as a community organizer. I have fought in the courts as a civil rights attorney. I have fought in the legislature. I have won some fights and I've lost some too. I've seen good legislation die, because good intentions were not enough. Because they weren't fortified with political will. Or political power. I've seen how this country's judgment has been clouded, sometimes by fear and division, how we have been made to be afraid of each other, afraid of immigrants, afraid of gays, afraid of people who don't look like us. I know how hard change is. But I also know this: that nothing worthwhile in this country has ever happened without someone somewhere was willing to hope.

3. STORIES THAT COMMUNICATE THE ORGANIZATION'S BRAND

Stories can communicate the brand of the organization that the leader represents by recounting the past accomplishments of the organization, thus enhancing trust in the organization.

Thus in February 2008, Barack Obama told this story about the brand of the Democratic Party:

So Democrats, this is our moment. This is our time for change. Our party, the Democratic Party, has always been at its best, when we are led not by polls but by principles, not by calculation but by conviction, when we summon the entire nation around a higher purpose, a common purpose.

We're the party of Jefferson, who wrote the words that we're still trying to meet, that all of us are created equal, that all of us deserve the chance to pursue our happiness.

We're the party of Jackson who took back the White House for the people of this country.

We're the party of a man who overcame his own disability to tell us that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, who faced down fascism, and liberated a continent from tyranny.

We're the party of a young president who asked us what we could do for our country, and challenged us to do it.

That is who we are.

4. STORIES THAT SHARE KNOWLEDGE

Leaders can also use stories to share knowledge. Such stories recount how problems arose and what can be done about them. Such stories tend to be told with considerable detail.

This example comes from Franklin D. Roosevelt's radio broadcast of March 12, 1933 (the first of his celebrated fireside chats) aimed at explaining to the American people why the banking system had collapsed and what was being done about it.

I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking— with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking but more particularly with the overwhelming majority who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of checks. I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be. I recognize that the many proclamations from State Capitols and from Washington, the legislation, the Treasury regulations, etc., couched for the most part in banking and legal terms should be explained for the benefit of the average citizen. I owe this in particular because of the fortitude and good temper with which everybody has accepted the inconvenience and hardships of the banking holiday. I know that when you understand what we in Washington have been about I shall continue to have your cooperation as fully as I have had your sympathy and help during the past week.

First of all let me state the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put the money into a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit-bonds, commercial paper, mortgages and many other kinds of loans. In other words, the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around. A comparatively small part of the money you put into the bank is kept in currency -- an amount which in normal times is wholly sufficient to cover the cash needs of the average citizen. In other words the total amount of all the currency in the country is only a small fraction of the total deposits in all of the banks.

What, then, happened during the last few days of February and the first few days of March? Because of undermined confidence

on the part of the public, there was a general rush by a large portion of our population to turn bank deposits into currency or gold. -- A rush so great that the soundest banks could not get enough currency to meet the demand. The reason for this was that on the spur of the moment it was, of course, impossible to sell perfectly sound assets of a bank and convert them into cash except at panic prices far below their real value.

The broadcast continues and explains in some detail how the crisis came about and what was being done about it. The stories in the talk played a major role in calming fears about the unfolding crisis and paving the way for its resolution.

5. STORIES THAT LEAD INTO THE FUTURE

Although it is frequently said that leaders tell stories about the future, the future story is a difficult story to pull off.

One successful example is Winston Churchill on June 4, 1940 at the end of a long speech shortly after a large part of the British army had been evacuated from Dunkirk:

I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do.

That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government –every man of them. That is the will of Parliament and the nation. The British Empire and the French Republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail.

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in

*the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.*⁸

The speech was effective. Churchill's audience in the House of Commons was initially stunned, and then erupted into a lengthy ovation. The speech was repeated on the radio, and came to symbolize the British attitude to the war.

Although the picture that Churchill sketches is an evocative one of the British people resisting the Nazis to the death, fighting them in by land, by sea, by air, and so on, Churchill is not telling a story in any conventional sense. Rather, he is painting a set of romantic scenes in the future, which are not linked together in time and space in any coherent way.

The fact that Churchill's speech isn't a detailed story isn't meant as a criticism of the speech. On the contrary, one of the strengths of the speech lies in its very lack of specificity. If Churchill had spelt out in detail how the British people were going to fight, then he would have been in considerable difficulty, because it was impossible to say in June 1940 how the war would unfold. If he had given any detail it would have been quickly disproved. So Churchill took the wiser course and instead painted a set of evocative word pictures of the future.

6. POWERFUL STORY SEQUENCES

One way of making the future story effective is to embed it in a sequence of stories: the story of who we have been >> the story of who we are >> the story of who we are going to be. The alignment of the three stories can help make the future story credible.

This narrative pattern has been used for millennia in speeches from Pericles Funeral Oration in ancient Greece to Barack Obama's campaign oratory in 2008.

Here it is in Abraham Lincoln's use of it in his address at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863⁹:

The story of who we *Four score and seven years ago our fathers
brought forth on this continent, a new nation,*

have been: *conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

The story of who we are: *Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.

The story of who we are going to be: *It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

THE PITFALLS OF LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING

For a leader who has the appropriate skills, storytelling can be a powerful communications tool. But when used unskillfully, it can have the opposite effect of what is intended.

Take the example of Al Gore, who campaigned on the theme of change in the 2000 US Presidential election. On October 3, 2000, millions of viewers tuned in to see the first televised debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush. Although Gore as the vice-president of a highly successful administration, polls showed the two candidates to be in a statistical dead heat. The debate was a pivotal moment since most of the crucial swing voters would be viewing. Gore knew that he had yet to connect with the electorate. And he knew that in order to connect with the electorate, he had to tell stories. So he arrived at the debate ready to tell stories. Unfortunately they were the wrong stories and had the opposite effect of what was intended.

1. TELLING STORIES THAT AREN'T TRUE

In the first instance, Gore overstated his role in the handling of some fires in Texas. The issue arose because the moderator had asked each candidate to point to a decision or action "that illustrates your ability to handle the unexpected, the crisis under fire." Bush responded by talking about the emergency responses to the disastrous fires that ravaged Texas in 1996 and complimented James Lee Witt of FEMA for the good work done in a crisis. Gore immediately attempted to claim some of the credit, saying:

I want to compliment the governor on his response to those fires and floods in Texas. I accompanied James Lee Witt down to Texas when those fires broke out. And FEMA has been a major flagship project of our reinventing government efforts. And I agree it works extremely well now.

It turned out that Gore had not accompanied Witt to Texas in 1996. Rather Gore had visited Texas with Witt in 1998 during a spate of smaller fires. The gaffe added to the growing impression that Gore was someone who tended to exaggerate his accomplishments.

2. TELLING STORIES THAT AREN'T AUTHENTICALLY TRUE

Al Gore also told a story about a young girl for whom there was no space in her classroom:

A fifteen-year-old [girl] named Caley, who is in Sarasota High School [is in a] science class [that] was supposed to be for twenty-four students. She's the thirty-sixth student in that classroom. They sent me a picture of her in the classroom. They can't squeeze another desk in for her, so she has to stand during class. I want the federal government, consistent with

local control and new accountability, to make improvement of our schools the number one priority so Caley will have a desk and can sit down in a classroom where she can learn.

The next day it turned out that Caley's school did not make her stand in science class every day. That may have been true on that particular day when \$100,000 worth of new science equipment was stacked up and waiting for installation. The school had a practically brand new campus. It was said to be one of the top schools in the nation. All students were in regular classes with nine hundred computers and six hundred Internet sites. The school had no need of federal aid. So the story had exactly the opposite meaning of what Gore intended, and became an illustration of the argument against Gore: i.e. someone who needlessly threw Federal money at problems which didn't need Federal help.

3. TELLING STORIES WITH DISTRACTING DETAIL

Gore chose to end his closing statement with the following story:

There is a woman named Winifred Skinner here tonight from Iowa. I mentioned her earlier. She's seventy-nine years old. She has Social Security. I'm not going to cut her benefits or support any proposal that would. She gets a small pension, but in order to pay for her prescription drug benefits, she has to go out seven days a week several hours a day picking up cans. She came all the way from Iowa in a Winnebago with her poodle in order attend here tonight. I want to tell her, I'll fight for a prescription drug benefit for all seniors and fight for the people of this country for a prosperity that benefits all.

Gore's decision to close with this story was unfortunate. The suggestion that an impoverished seventy-nine-year-old woman drove 1,300 miles from Des Moines to Boston to listen to the debate, suggested that this wasn't an authentic story, but rather a self-serving piece of public relations generated by the Gore campaign machinery. The strangely discordant details—being seventy-nine years old, driving such a long distance in a Winnebago, owning a poodle, and yet having to spend several hours a day picking up cans to earn money to pay for her medication—rendered the story so implausible that it became an easy target for opponents and undermined Gore's credibility as a leader.

Gore's errors in leadership storytelling in 2000 contrast sharply with his successes in 2006 as a storyteller in his PowerPoint presentation and movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*. By 2006, Gore had learned how to tell effective stories. He went on to win an Emmy, an Oscar and even the Nobel Peace Prize, thus demonstrating the leadership storytelling isn't an innate skill. It can be learned.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF STORYTELLING FOR POLITICAL AND CIVIC LEADERS

As the role of leadership becomes steadily more important in a rapidly changing world, so storytelling is likely to become more prominent as a leadership tool.

More research is needed on the definition of the narrative patterns and combinations of narrative patterns and their effectiveness, particularly as compared to other means of communication. The current literature provides plausible hypotheses. These need to be confirmed.

While more research is needed, what is known already is sufficiently robust to warrant training of aspiring political and civic leaders. Anyone who wants to be a successful leader would be foolish not to master the elements of leadership storytelling.

Changes in the media are transforming the nature and dynamic of communications for political and civic leaders. Cable television, 24-hour television news, non-stop talk radio and large-scale activity in the "blogosphere" have resulted in an extraordinary acceleration of leadership communications. The voracious appetite of the various media for real or apparent controversy creates a volatile environment, which has been aptly called a "freak show".¹⁰ A casual remark, made in a seemingly informal unrecorded moment, can be captured on a cell-phone and broadcast round the world in minutes, thereby generating a massive media frenzy. As a result, leaders need to stay on top of fast-breaking news cycles and try to rebut any false stories before they become urban legends.

The US presidential campaign of 2008 also demonstrated the potential of the World Wide Web to transform the very nature of political campaigning. Barack Obama was able to raise more than \$600 million and enroll more than 10 million names in his database. In this way, an insurgent from a minority ethnic group, with no connections or resources other than good ideas and a set of powerful stories to communicate those ideas was able to defeat the most powerful and

entrenched political machines. This is bad news for those intent on preserving the status quo but good news for those who would like to see constructive change.

SUMMARY

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for leaders. Using it entails understanding the different kinds of stories, knowing which pattern works in which context, intuiting which stories one's listeners are living, and having the capacity to judge how they will respond to new stories are crucial aspects of using the power of storytelling. It means understanding the role of protagonists and whether the audience is likely to empathize with them. It implies being able to assess the tonality of the narrative and judge whether it will be positive, negative or neutral for any particular listener. It means knowing when a story should be minimalist or fully elaborated to achieve its purpose. It involves the capacity to perform the story with energy and conviction, so that words and actions are congruent. It entails a recognition that human beings are exquisitely sensitive to the meaning of narratives. Therein lies the threat and promise of storytelling. If used unskillfully, storytelling can backfire badly. If used skillfully, it can be the engine for powerful leadership communications.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

The following books offer a basic grounding in the theory and practice of leadership storytelling:

Denning, S. (2007) *The Secret Language of Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, focuses on the leadership challenge of sparking change among difficult audiences.

Denning, S. (2005) *The Leader's Guide To Storytelling*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, and Denning, S. *Squirrel Inc.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, analyze the different narrative patterns that leadership can use to achieve various leadership purposes. The former is a systematic text-book treatment of the subject. The latter is an animal fable.

Denning, S. (2000) *The Springboard*, Cambridge MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, tells the story of the use of storytelling to provoke change at the World Bank in the period 1996-2000.

Further insights on organizational storytelling can be found in:

Storytelling in Civic and Political Leadership:
an encyclopedia chapter by Stephen Denning

Gardner, H. (2006) *Changing Minds: The Art And Science of Changing Our Own And Other People's Minds (Leadership for the Common Good)* Cambridge MA: Harvard Business School Press.

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Mathews, R. and Wacker, W. (2007) *What's Your Story? Storytelling to Move Markets, Audiences, People, and Brands,* London: FT Press.

Books with a specifically political focus include:

Copeland, L. & Lamm, L. (1942) *The World's Great Speeches,* Dover Publications.

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Denton, R.E. (2002) *The 2000 Campaign: A Communication Perspective,* Westport CT: Praeger.

White, R. C. Jr. (2005) *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words,* NY: Random House.

Books examining the role of emotion in leadership communications include:

Brader, T. (2006) *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Westen, D. (2007) *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation.* Cambridge MA: Perseus.

A look at how changes in the media have affected political campaigns can be found in:

Halperin, M. & John F. Harris, J.F. (2006) *The Way to Win: Taking the White House in 2008.* NY: Random House.

The speeches and fireside chats of Franklin Roosevelt, and the speeches of Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama are available on the web and also deserve attention.

Storytelling in Civic and Political Leadership:
an encyclopedia chapter by Stephen Denning

¹ In this chapter, “story” is defined as an account of two or more events linked together causally in some fashion.

² MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press. 216.

³ Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961.

⁴ Denning, S. (2000) *The Springboard*, Cambridge MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

⁵ Slovic, P. (2007) *Judgment and Decision Making*, “‘If I look at the mass I will never act”: Psychic numbing and genocide’ 2(2) 1–17.

⁶ From Zuckerman, A. (2008) *The Wisdom Book*, <http://www.wisdombook.org/> (viewed December 1, 2008)

⁷ E.g. Westen, D. (2007) *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* Cambridge MA: Perseus. 147.

⁸ <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=393> <November 15, 2004>.

⁹ See Wills, G. (2006) *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, NY: Simon & Schuster.

¹⁰ Halperin, M. & John F. Harris, J.F. (2006) *The Way to Win: Taking the White House in 2008*. NY: Random House.