What Is Public Narrative?

The questions of *what am I called to do? what is my community called to do? and what are we called to do now?* Are at least as old as Moses' conversation with God at the burning bush. *Why me?* asks Moses, when called to free his people. And, *who – or what – is calling me? Why these people? Who are they anyway? And why here, now, in this place?*

Practicing leadership – enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty – requires engaging the heart, the head, and the hands: motivation, strategy, and action. Public narrative can be used to access the emotional resources needed to respond mindfully by mobilizing hope over fear, empathy over alienation, and self-worth over self-doubt. Leaders learn how to tell a "story of self" that can communicate the values that explain why they have been called to lead; a "story of us" that brings alive values their community shares; and a "story of now" of the urgent challenge to those values that requires action. This articulation of the relationship of self, other, and action is also at the core of our moral traditions. As Rabbi Hillel, the 1st Century Jerusalem sage put it, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?" Narrative is the discursive process through which individuals, communities, and nations make choices, construct identity, and inspire action. Because we use narrative to engage the "head" and the "heart," it both instructs and inspires - teaching us not only how we *ought* to act, but motivating us *to act* - and thus engaging the "hands" as well.

I first asked myself these questions in 1964, while I was completing my third year at Harvard College. I had become active in the civil rights movement and volunteered for the Mississippi Summer Project. In Mississippi, I found the calling I would pursue for the next 28 years – organizing migrant farm workers, community organizations, trade unions, and electoral politics.

In 1991, in order to deepen my understanding of my work, I returned to Harvard, completed my undergraduate degree, Class of 1964-92, an MPA in 1993, and a Ph.D. in sociology in 2000. When I joined the Kennedy School faculty, I discovered a second calling as a teacher, scholar, and advocate. And I found myself moved by values rooted in the same life

experience that had set me on my first path: the work of my parents as rabbi and teacher; our experience of the Holocaust, and growing up with Passover Seders, challenged by the teaching that the journey from slavery to freedom passes from one generation to the next; and the critical eyes and the hopeful hearts of young people.

In recent years, scholars have taken up the study of narrative across a wide range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, political science, philosophy, legal studies, theology, literary studies, and the arts. Professions engaged in narrative practice include the military, the ministry, the law, politics, business, and the arts. This approach builds on our natural understanding of narrative, its analysis across the disciplines, and its practice across the professions.

Nine years ago, convinced that a major challenge we face as individuals, as a culture, and as a nation is to reclaim our capacity to articulate, draw courage from, and act upon public values, I designed this approach as a way to learn how we can translate our values into action. The pedagogy is rooted in the nature of public narrative: a combination of *Self, Us*, and *Now*. We model public narrative, engage in reflection on narrative, learn how to coach one another, and learn how to evaluate based on a practical and analytic understanding of what we are doing. Public narrative is not public speaking. As Jayanti Ravi, one of my students from India put it: the course teaches how to bring out the "glow" from within, rather than how to apply a "gloss" from without.

Cognition, Motivation and Action: Why, How and What: Heart, Head, & Hands

Psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that we interpret the world in analytic and narrative modes.[1] Cognitively mapping the world, we identify patterns, discern connections, test relationships, and hypothesize empirical claims – the domain of analysis. But we also map the world affectively, coding experiences, objects, and symbols as good or bad for us, fearful or safe, hopeful or depressing, etc. When we consider purposeful action, we ask ourselves two questions:

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[1] Jerome Bruner, (1986), "Two Modes of Thought", Chapter 2 in Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.11 – 25.

why and how. Analysis helps answer the *how* question – how do we use resources efficiently to detect opportunities, compare costs, etc. But to answer the *why* question – why does this matter, why do we care, why do we value one goal over another – we turn to narrative. The why question in not why we think we *ought* to act, but, rather why we *do* act, what moves us to act, our motivation, our values. Or, as St. Augustine put it, the difference between "knowing" the good as an ought and "loving the good" as a source of motivation.[2] It takes engagement of both the head and the heart to move the hands in a purposeful way, the domain of action.

TWO WAYS OF KNOWING

Two Kinds of Knowing

Values, Motivation and Action

To understand *motivation* – that which inspires action – consider the word *emotion* and their shared root word, *motor* –to move. Psychologists argue that information provided by our emotions, which we experience as feelings, is partly physiological, as when our respiration

[2] St. Augustine

changes or our body temperature alters; partly behavioral, as when we are moved to advance or to flee, to stand up or to sit down; and partly cognitive since we can describe what we feel as fear, love, desire, or joy.

We also experience our values through our emotions. Our emotions provide us with vital information about how to live our lives, not in contrast to reasoned deliberation, but more as a precondition for it.[3] Moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that because we experience value through emotion, trying to make moral choices without emotional information is futile.[4] She supports her argument with research on people afflicted with lesions on the amygdale, a part of the brain central to our emotions. When faced with decisions, they can come up with one option after another, but cannot decide because decisions ultimately are based on judgments of value. And if we cannot experience emotion, we cannot experience values that orient us to the choices we must make.

Some emotions inhibit mindful action in response to challenges while others facilitate it. Exploring the relationship between emotion and purposeful action, political scientist George Marcus points to two of our neurophysiologic systems – surveillance and disposition. [5] Our *surveillance system* compares what we *expect* to see with what we *do* see, tracking anomalies which, when observed, translate into anxiety. Without this emotional cue, Marcus argues, we simply operate out of habit. When we do feel anxiety, it is a way of saying to ourselves, "Hey! Pay attention! There's a bear in the doorway!" The big question is what we do with that anxiety. And the problem is that we are hard wired to react to anxiety with fear: we run away, we strike out, or we freeze, hoping "it" won't notice us. When we lived in isolated bands roaming the countryside this reaction may have been quite constructive. On the other hand, when we began to form larger communities, we began to find ways to counter this fear 'reaction' with a far more purposeful and agentic "response." Chief among these ways is the use of stories because stories are built around moments of challenge, and because we can identify with the protagonist of a

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[3] G. E. Marcus, (2002), The Sentimental Citizen. (University Park, PA, Penn State University Press).

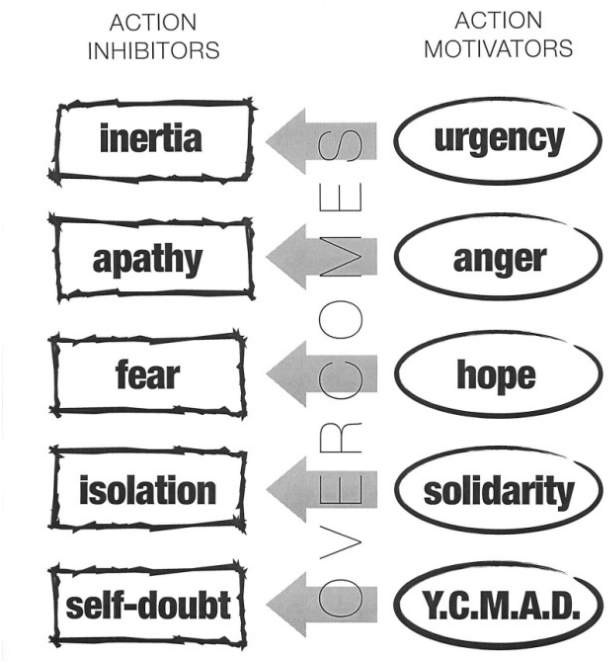
[4] Martha Nussbaum, (2001), *Upheavals of Thought: The intelligence of emotions.* (New York, Cambridge University Press).

[5] G. E. Marcus, (2002), *The Sentimental Citizen*. (University Park, PA, Penn State University Press).

story, we can feel what he or she feels, experiencing their sources of hope over fear, so that they become a resource for us in responding with hope over fear. If we are hopeful, our curiosity is more likely to be triggered, leading to exploration that can yield learning and creative problem solving. So our readiness to consider action, capacity to consider it well, and ability to act on our consideration rests on how we feel.

Leadership requires engaging others in purposeful action by mobilizing feelings that can enable a mindful – or agentic – "response" as opposed to a fearful "reaction". This can produce an emotional dissonance, a tension that may only be resolved through action. Organizers call this *agitation*. For example, my fear of not upsetting the boss (teacher, parent, employer) because of my dependency on him or her may conflict with my sense of self-respect if the boss acts to violate it. One person may become angry enough to challenge her boss; another may "swallow her pride" and another may resist the organizer who points out the conflict. Any of these options is costly, but one may serve a person's interests better than another.

As the chart below illustrates, while inertia – the security of habitual routine – can blind us to the signs of a need for action, *urgency* and sometimes *anger* get our attention. F*ear* can paralyze us, driving us to rationalize inaction (freezing), run away (flight) or strike out (fight); amplified by *self-doubt* and *isolation*, we may become victims of despair. On the other hand, *hope* can inspire us and, in concert with *self-esteem (You Can Make A Difference)* and *solidarity (love, empathy)*, can enable us to find the courage to respond mindfully.



Urgency that captures our attention creates the space for new action, but is less about time than it is about priority. The urgent need to complete a problem set due tomorrow supplants the important need to figure out what to do with the rest of life. The urgent need to attend to a critically ill family member supplants the important need to attend the next business meeting (or ought to?). The urgent need to devote the day turning out voters for a critical election supplants the important need to review the family budget. Commitment and concentration of energy are required to launch anything new, and creating a sense of urgency is often the way to get the focused commitment that is required.

What about inertia's first cousin, *apathy*? One way to counter apathy is with *anger* – not rage, but outrage and indignation with injustice. Constructive anger grows out of experiencing the difference between *what ought to be* and *what is* – the way we feel when our moral order has been violated.[6] Sociologist Bill Gamson describes this as using an "injustice frame" to counter a "legitimacy frame."[7] As scholars of "moral economy" have taught us, people rarely mobilize to

[6] Anger as contrast of is and ought.

[7] W. A. Gamson, (1992), *Talking Politics.* (New York, Cambridge University Press).

protest inequality as such, but they do mobilize to protest "unjust" inequality.[8] In other words, our values, moral traditions, and sense of personal dignity can function as critical sources of the motivation to act.

Where can we find the *courage* to act in spite of *fear*? Trying to eliminate that to which we react fearfully is a fool's errand because it locates the source of our fear outside ourselves, rather than within our own hearts. Trying to make ourselves "fearless" is counterproductive if it means acting more out of "nerve than brain." Leaders can "inoculate" by warning others that the opposition will threaten them with this and woo them with that. The fact that these behaviors are expected reveals the opposition as more predictable and thus less to be feared. But in reality, it is the choice to act in spite of fear that is the meaning of courage. And of the emotions that help us find courage, perhaps most important is *hope*.

Where do we go to get some hope? One source of hope is the experience of "credible solutions," reports not only of success elsewhere, but direct experience of small successes and small victories. Another important source of hope for many is in faith traditions, spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, and moral understandings. Many of the great social movements – Gandhi, Civil Rights, and Solidarity – drew strength from religious traditions, and much of today's organizing occurs in faith communities. Relationships offer another source of hope. We all know people who inspire hopefulness just by being around them. "Charisma" can be seen as the capacity to inspire hope in others, inspiring others to believe in themselves. Psychologists who have begun to explore the role of "positive emotions" give particular attention to the "psychology of hope."[9] More philosophically, Moses Maimonides, the Jewish scholar of the 12th Century, argued that hope is belief in the "plausibility of the possible" as opposed to the "necessity of the probable."[10] While it is always "probable" that Goliath will win, it is also true that sometimes David wins, a sense of the "possible" that we experience in our own lives as well. Hope emerges from this sense of possibility, freeing us from the shackles of probability.

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[8] Scott (1976)

[9] Martin E.P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, (2000), "Positive Psychology: An Introduction", American Psychologist.

[10] Maimonides.

Leaders counter self-doubt by attending to the self-efficacy of others, creating the sense that *you can make a difference*, or YCMAD. One way to inspire this sentiment is to frame action in terms of *what people can do*, not what they can't do. If an organizer designs a plan calling for each new volunteer to recruit 100 people and provides no leads, training, or coaching, she or he will only create deeper feelings of self-doubt. Recognition based on real accomplishment, not empty flattery, can help, meaning there is no real recognition without *accountability.* Accountability does not show lack of trust, but is evidence that what one is doing really matters.

Finally, leaders can counter feelings of *isolation* with the experience of *belovedness* or *solidarity.* This is the role of mass meetings, celebration, singing, common dress, and shared language.

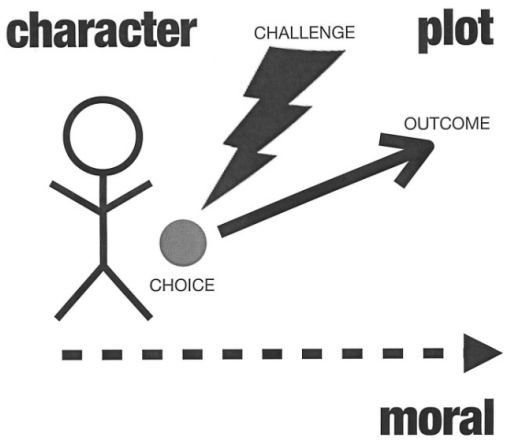
The way we feel about things, however, may have little to do with the present, but rather may be a legacy of lessons learned long ago. Suppose that, as a four-year-old, you are playing on a swing-set at the park when a bigger kid tries to kick you off. You run to your parent for help, but your parent laughs it off. In that moment you are angry and embarrassed, convinced that your parent doesn't care. You now have learned the lesson that counting on others is a bad idea. As an adult, evaluating what to do about a pay cut, your past experience will make it unlikely that you will join other workers to protest. You fear counting on others, and you may even tell yourself you deserved that pay cut. If you are still in the grips of that fear when an organizer comes along and tells you that, with a union, you could keep the employer from cutting your pay, you will see that organizer as a threat, her claims suspect, and her proposals hopeless.

So exercising leadership often requires engaging in an *emotional dialogue*, drawing on one set of emotions (or values) which are grounded in one set of experiences, in order to counter another set of emotions (or values), grounded in different experiences – a *dialogue of the heart*. This dialogue of the heart, far from being irrational, can restore choices that have been abandoned in despair.

The Power of Story

The discursive form through which we translate values into action is story. A story is crafted of just three elements: ***plot***, ***character***, and ***moral***. The effect depends on the ***setting***: who tells the story, who listens, where they are, why they are there, and when.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE



Plot

A plot engages us, captures our interest, and makes us pay attention. "I got up this morning, had breakfast, and came to school." Is that a plot? Why? Why not?

How about: "I was having breakfast this morning when I heard a loud screeching coming from the roof. At that very moment I looked outside to where my car was parked, but it was gone!!!" Now what's going on? What's the difference?

A story begins. An actor is moving toward a desired goal. But then some kind of challenge appears. The plan is suddenly up in the air. The actor must figure out what to do. This is when we get interested. We want to find out what happens.

Why do we care?

Dealing with the unexpected – small and large – defines the texture of our lives. No more tickets at the movie theater. You're about to lose your job. Your marriage is on the verge of break-up. We are constantly faced with the unexpected, and what we're going to do. And what is

the source of the greatest uncertainty around us? Other people. The subject of most stories is about how to interact with other people.

As human beings we make choices in the present, based on remembering the past and imagining the future. This is what it means to be an *agent*. But when we act out of habit, we don't choose; we just follow the routine. It is only when the routines break down, when the guidelines are unclear, when no one can tell us what to do, that we make real choices and become the creators of our own lives, communities, and futures. Then we become the agents of our own fate. These moments can be as frightening as they are exhilarating.

A plot consists of just three elements: a ***challenge***, a ***choice***, and an ***outcome***. Attending to plot is how we learn to deal with the unpredictable. Researchers report that most of the time that parents spend with young children is in story telling – stories of the family, the child's stories, stories of the neighbors. Bruner describes this as *agency training*: the way we learn how to process choices in the face of uncertainty. And because our curiosity about the unexpected is infinite, we invest billions of dollars and countless hours in films, literature and sports events – not to mention religious practices, cultural activities, and national celebrations.

Character

Although a story requires a plot, it only works if we can identify with a character. Through our empathetic identification with a protagonist, we experience the emotional content of the story. That is how we learn what the story has to teach to our hearts, not only our heads. As Aristotle wrote of Greek tragedy, this is how the protagonist's experience can touch us and, perhaps, open our eyes.[11] Arguments persuade with evidence, logic, and data. Stories persuade by this empathetic identification. Have you ever been to movie where you couldn't identify with any of the characters? It's boring. Sometimes we identify with protagonists that are only vaguely "like us" – like the road runner (if not the coyote) in the cartoons. Other times we identify with protagonists that are very much like us – as in stories about friends, relatives, neighbors.

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[11] Aristotle, *The Poetics.*

Sometimes the protagonists of a story are *us,* as when we find ourselves in the midst of an unfolding story, in which we are the authors of the outcome.

Moral

Stories teach. We've all heard the ending – "and that is the moral of the story." Have you ever been at a party where someone starts telling a story and they go on...and on...and on...? Someone may say (or want to say), "Get to the point!" We deploy stories to *make a point*, and to evoke a response.

The moral of a successful story is emotionally experienced understanding, not only conceptual understanding, and a lesson of the heart, not only the head. When stated only conceptually, many a moral becomes a banality. Saying "haste makes waste" does not communicate the emotional experience of losing it all because we moved too quickly – but it can remind of that feeling, learned through a story. Nor can we expect morals to provide detailed tactical information. We do not retell the story of David and Goliath because it teaches us how to use a slingshot. What the story teaches is that a "little guy" – with courage, resourcefulness, and imagination – can beat a "big guy," especially one with Goliath's arrogance. We feel David's anger, courage, and resourcefulness and feel *hopeful* for our own lives because he is victorious. Stories thus teach how to manage our emotions, not repress them, so we can act with agency to face our own challenges.

Stories teach us how to act in the "right" way. They are not simply examples and illustrations. When they are well told, we experience *the point*, and we feel hope. It is that experience, not the words as such, that can move us to action. Because sometimes that is the point – we have to act.

Setting

Stories are told. They are not a disembodied string of words, images, and phrases. They are not messages, sound bites, or brands – although these rhetorical fragments may reference a story. Storytelling is fundamentally relational. As we listen, we evaluate the story, and we find it more or less easy to enter, depending on the storyteller. Is it his or her story? We hear it one way.

Is it the story of a friend, a colleague, or a family member? We hear it another way. Is it a story without time, place, or specificity? We step back. Is it a story we share, perhaps a Bible story? Perhaps we draw closer to one another. Storytelling is how we interact with each other about values; how we share experiences with each other, counsel each other, comfort each other, and inspire each other to action.

Public Narrative: Self, Us, Now

Leadership, especially leadership on behalf of social change, often requires telling a new public story, or adapting an old one: a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now. A story of self, communicates the values that are calling you to act. A story of us communicates values shared by those whom you hope to motivate to act. And a story of now communicates the urgent challenge to those values that demands action now. Participating in a social action not only often involves a rearticulating of one's story of self, us, and now, but marks an entry into a world of uncertainty so daunting that access to sources of hope is essential. To illustrate, I'll draw examples from the first seven minutes of Sen. Barack Obama's speech to the Democratic National Convention in July 2004.

Public Narrative