

**e-Book
Version**

The
halo



and
the
noose

*The power of story telling and
story listening in business life*

by Graham Williams and Dorian Haarhoff

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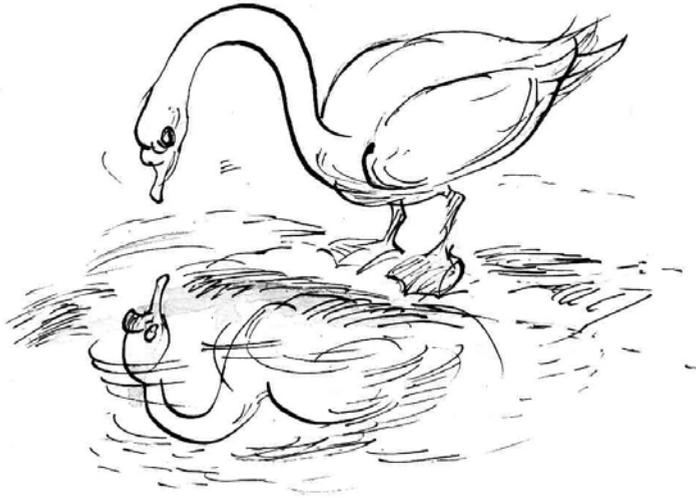
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Chapter 1 Why Stories?

Africa breathes stories... In Africa things are stories, they store stories, and they yield stories at the right moment of dreaming, when we are open to the secret side of objects and moods¹

Ben Okri

Why is story so vital in business life?

A professor and an old peasant woman are discussing how it is that the world is held up in space and does not fall down.

"Well you see," says the old woman, "the world rests on a giant plate".

"Interesting. And what does the plate rest on?"

"On the back of a giant tortoise".

"And what does that tortoise rest on?"

"On the back of another tortoise..."

"And what does..."

"Don't bother your head, professor. It's tortoises all the way down".

And stories all the way down. Story is the foundation. Everything rests on story – one way or another. Ultimately, it is story that makes the business world go round.

The Courage to Be

In our work with an organization, we told the story of Hans Christian Andersen's *Ugly Duckling*.² We witnessed someone discovering – during the telling – that many of us feel



WHY STORIES?

ugly inside at times, and that it's OK to find your own way to self-acceptance, and then becoming accepted and belonging to a team. We were thrilled to see people encouraged to move from being negative to becoming positive and determined after hearing about Lance Armstrong's overcoming of cancer and going on to win seven Tours de France, as told in *It's not about the Bike*.³

We have seen people inspired and motivated to tackle the seemingly impossible after being introduced to the lessons in *Touching the Void* of Joe Simpson and Simon Yates' tale of fortitude and courage.⁴

We believe that story is an integral, indispensable part of the life and growth of organizations and people in business, now more than ever.

When we were at junior school, an early reader offered us the story of *Chicken Licken* who feared the sky would drop on his head.⁵ Sometimes the sky does drop on our heads. Often the unexpected arrives in our work and personal life. Random events. Weather patterns, human agency, natural causes. Sometimes they involve death—literal suicides or metaphoric. They bring changes and challenges. These events arrive beyond our control.

QUICK READ

Some insights offered in *Touching the Void*

Avoid doing the stupid and beware inadequate planning

When disaster strikes, you're basically on your own and have to rely on your own resourcefulness

The hero's journey follows a start, succeed, meet obstacle, fail, learn, continue, new obstacle, succeed, proceed cycle

We all need to find a higher spiritual meaning or treasure that carries us through the tough times

We must learn to allow our internal motivational voice to drive us forward and onward

When faced with a massive transition or challenge the move from despair/ lethargy/ helplessness comes from having a plan

In business we cannot procrastinate. We stand still but need to take action and make decisions – continuously, whatever the circumstances and no matter how great our uncertainty

We need to accept/let go of what we can't change

Sometimes the unknown is better than the known and leads to success. (We do not so much fear the unknown but the loss of the known). Sometimes we must counter-intuitively go down and deeper, and not up

We need a vision and intermediate, measured goals and realize them with a determined obsession – taking one small step at a time



WHY STORIES?

This is where the story enters. A story teaches me that what happens to me is one thing. How I react is another. The event and my response are not cause and effect. The wise ones, such as Einstein, tell us that it is futile to look for a cause and result in the same event. The events open up the choice of possible responses. This is the gift of story – the freedom to choose our responses. Victor Frankl, the therapist, who went through the death camps and saw the very worst that human beings can do to human beings, wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* based on his observations.⁶ He believes the greatest freedom we have as human beings, is a freedom to choose how we will respond to a given set of circumstances.

Ryokan, a Japanese Zen monk, lived some 200 years ago. One night he came home from playing with children to find that a thief had broken into his home and stolen his meagre possessions. Ryokan sat down at his window and wrote, "The thief left it behind, the moon at my window".

Ryokan exercises choice. Instead of focusing on what has been taken away, he rests his attention on what cannot be taken away.

Not all of us are as enlightened as Ryokan. Or as quick to get to that state of grace. Robert Frost writes:

Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with a drift of things
To yield with the grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?⁷

We may well go through a natural cycle of loss. Grief for the loss of job, for the loss of a loved one. After the period of grief, the choice opens for us. How will we respond to what has happened?

The sense of choice is enriched because we seldom know the full meaning or implication of what has happened. We often fall into the temptation to conclude a story before it is over – to prejudge the outcome. Another trap that the story reveals is that I can get stuck in the 'if only' of the past. In truth, I am in 'don't know mind'.

Every day a village Rabbi goes to the synagogue to pray. One day the local policeman accosts him. "Where are you going?"

The rabbi responds, "I don't know".

"What do you mean, you don't know? Every day you go to the synagogue. Now I'm going to throw you into jail for lying to me".

As the cell door clangs shut the rabbi calls out, "You see, I don't know".

Stories all the Way Down

Stories raise awareness, stimulate thinking, facilitate leadership, offer flexibility and possibility, nurture and engage. The telling of a story provides us with the opportunity to own and take charge of our own stories, beliefs, values and knowledge and share these confidently with others.





Chapter 8

Silent Stories

*The young farm-child
Interrupts rice husking
To gaze at the moon¹*

Basho

What am I leaving out?

One night an old monk, deep in contemplation, feeling stuck and wanting to grow in faith, asked for a sign.

A voice dropped a question from the heavens, "What are you leaving out?"

The monk was puzzled by this response. He woke a younger monk and asked the question, "What am I leaving out?"

The sleepy monk responded, "Me" and fell back asleep.

Still puzzled, the monk wandered outside the monastery and looked up at the night sky with the question in his mind. The night sky said, "Me too". He tripped and fell with his face into the mud and the mud said, "Me too".

What am I leaving out? Who am I not inviting into the conversation at work? Perhaps the farm boy in Matsuo Basho's poem, shelling the husks, might have something to say to me about what is happening on the farm. About the 'bigger picture'. Or about the 'smaller picture'. We have a need to develop both a bird's and a worms' eye view, abilities to see the bigger picture and also the role of and interconnectivity of constituent parts.

SILENT STORIES

In every company there are stories that fall between the cracks – stories that are not being told. Sometimes the person does not feel important enough or that it is their place to share the information that they observe and the knowledge and life experience they possess. A waiter might have stories about customer service that the manager does not have access to. Yet when the restaurant management plans a meeting about improving service, perhaps nobody asks the waiter to attend. The cleaner might observe something of significance in the reception area but does not speak. A woman employee might withhold knowledge and information because men dominate the conversation.

When the boss is present, people may lapse into a tacit agreement mode, rather than speak out and offer a different viewpoint. They might fear ridicule or sanction. Conformity may be a more valued cultural element than diversity – of thinking style, relating behaviour, viewpoints.

Sometimes a story is withheld for selfish reasons – the leading sales person may resist sharing her secrets of success because of no perceived reward, perhaps even a “disbenefit”. The withholding of the story might also have to do with perceived rewards – creating a power base that excludes rivals.

A farming community was growing crops for a local competition – the highlight of the year. Farmer Jacob who was out of a particular seed, asked Farmer Reuben on the neighbouring farm for some.

Farmer Reuben gave him his best seed. Farmer Benjamin, observing this, asked, “Why are you doing this? Don’t you want to win the competition?”

Farmer Reuben responded, “You have forgotten the wind factor. Whatever I give him, will blow back into my face”.

Midrash

Around every story, there are stories that are not being told.

In the Jewish tradition, there is the idea of *Midrash*. *Midrash* involves fleshing out a story we only have the barest details for – the bones of the story. An example of this might be the story of Lot’s wife in the Old Testament. She turned around and gazed at the city God had told them to leave. She was turned into a pillar of salt. *Midrash* might involve creating the story of Mrs. Lot – what was in her mind and why did she turn around?

Here are a few lines from a poem *The Salt of the Earth*:²

her eyes circled the city of Sodom
that had been hearthstone.
they swept like the reed broom
wielded before leaving.
she hunted under the sleeping mat
for a memory shaped
by the weight of their bodies.





Chapter 17

Mindfulness

*Authentic connection is the core of quality relationships and mindfulness is a practice that opens and deepens our capacities for connection*¹
Surrey

Being in the Moment

A man approaches a teacher, who is sitting meditating.

He asks, "How can you sit there when there is so much pain, suffering and grief in the world?"

The teacher picks up a drinking glass and holds it in the air. "You see this glass? Look how it catches the light". Then she fills the glass with water and runs her finger around the rim. "Listen now how the glass makes music".

She puts the glass on a shelf behind her. "But I could easily knock this glass off with my elbow or the wind could take it. And it would be shattered into a thousand pieces. So I presume that the glass is already broken, and I enjoy every moment of it".

To be in the 'flow zone' and perform effortlessly, we need to find real purpose, meaning and bliss in the work that we do. We need also to practice mindfulness while we work and especially during our interactions with others and when listening to their troubles, triumphs and tales.

Being mindful means being 'present', being calm and relaxed, being focused – in order to be attentive, concentrated and empathetic.

In the Eye of the Storm

GTE Airphone operator Lisa Jefferson would probably like to forget what was going on at the other end of the phone that morning (of September 11th) when she spoke to Todd Beamer, a passenger on the hijacked United Flight 93. It was his plane that crashed into a field in western Pennsylvania after passengers bravely decided to charge the hijackers.

Knowing he was going to die, Todd tried to call his wife from the plane. But he had a problem with his credit card and was connected to Lisa. According to news reports, they spoke for 13 minutes during which Lisa took details of the hijackers, consoled Todd and promised to call his wife. Finally, she prayed with him before the air phone connection was terminated. Lisa told the authorities she heard passengers wailing in the background. Later she called Todd's wife to relay her husband's heroic final moments and message.

How was Lisa able to keep herself together in those harrowing and unprecedented 13 minutes? Service professionals understand the importance of remaining calm, strong and focused.²

Darwin Awards

We live so much in distraction. Sometimes in a crisis our minds move to past or future. Remember the monk who drank soy sauce then said he had drunk water? What if that had been paraffin? Not being mindful can cost us our lives – literally and figuratively.

The Darwin rewards “salute the improvement of the human genome by honouring those who remove themselves from life. Of necessity, this honour is generally bestowed posthumously”.

The Darwin Awards website carries many stories about not being present. In one of them in 2003, a Brazilian worker was responsible for cleaning out the storage tanks of petrol tanker trucks. He began filling a tanker with water, a standard safety procedure that forces flammable vapour out of the container. When he returned an hour later to check, he lit a cigarette lighter so he could see into the tank. The vapour explosion threw him 100 meters. He died from severe burns, and an injury to his head.

Monkey Mind, Puppy Mind

Meditation teachers often liken our restless minds to a monkey or an untrained puppy. The monkey chatters and leaps from branch to branch. The puppy wanders everywhere. If you have tried to sit quietly emptying your mind from thought, you will have experienced just how difficult this practice is. This poem illustrates how easily we are distracted.

Puppy Mind

the puppy runs wild
after the smell of rabbit,
sniffed down a hole.
whines and scratches





Chapter 18

Story Patterns

Heroes and broken contracts can only be referred to by virtue of their prior existence in the narrative world'

Jerome Bruner

The Use of Maps

We know that the map is not the territory. Yet maps, if drawn to scale and if updated when the landscape changes, can offer us context and insight. Stories provide this kind of map in that they offer us connections and patterns, insights and a bird's eye view that cannot be seen from the actual terrain.

Tortoise rested at a waterhole. Eagle landed next to it. Tortoise said to Eagle, "Look at this huge waterhole and these huge reeds. This is all there is".

Eagle flapped his wings and ascended, bearing Tortoise in its claws. Tortoise saw the pond slipping away, becoming smaller and smaller. He saw the other animals running across the plain. Eagle flew so high that Tortoise saw the curve of the earth.

Then Eagle set Tortoise down back at the waterhole. Tortoise travelled as fast as he could go to tell his tribe about the world he'd seen when he ascended on Eagle's wings.

The other tortoises said, "Nonsense, you were dreaming. The waterhole and the reeds – that is all there is".

But one tortoise asked, "Where can I find that eagle?"

Stories also place what happens to us in a larger context. Through offering us a pattern, they connect to our work experience and locate us in the process. Paradoxically by

being transported to a higher plane we become more grounded. This is one of the ironies that enriches our experience. This chapter offers a number of these story maps, models or patterns.

The Eight P's

You can hang a personal or organizational story on eight words beginning with the letter P – people, place, progress, problem, process, plan, possibility, product, e.g. somebody starts a business in a small town. The business catches on. Gets too big. Takes on more staff. Structures break down. Leader and team meet to brainstorm and make a plan. This leads to new possibilities. A new product emerges.

A product here could be either a material object or a way of doing business.

The Four Circles

Another pattern strongly evident in fairy tales, mythology and in other ways of telling, involves four circles. This is an ancient Motif. This story illustrates this pattern or movement.

A pot stood on a shelf in the museum. Many came to admire it. The woman who worked there took special care of this pot. She dusted it carefully and arranged it so the light from the window fell on it. (First circle).

One day somebody left the window open and a gust of wind knocked the pot off the shelf. The pot lay in a thousand pieces. When the woman came to work the next day, she put her face in her hands and grieved for the broken pot. (Second circle).

Then piece-by-piece she began to reassemble it. The woman glued pieces together and searched in the cracks between the floorboards. Those pieces she could not find, she measured and made. (Third circle).

When she had glued the last piece, she stood back to gaze at her handiwork. Then she placed the pot back on the shelf. Despite its cracks many came to admire it. (Fourth circle).

The creation story of *Genesis* also mirrors this pattern. Circle one is about perfection – the perfect beginning. Paradise (The Womb). The story hasn't started yet. If a story remains in the womb, there is no story:

A prince wanders into the forest and meets a princess. They gaze at each other mind-to-mind, eye-to-eye, heart-to-heart. They link hands and run to the palace. The Queen and King say, "Of course, you can marry". And they live happily ever after.

Most people respond with the word 'boring'. Nothing happens. There is no movement. Nothing to resolve.

It seems that one of the necessary events of a story is the fall from grace and out of wholeness. Stories exist to help us make sense of the difficulties, challenges, brokenness. There are many versions of a person approaching the Enlightened one to ask, "Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?" The Enlightened one responds, "To thicken the plot".



The Halo and the Noose offers an innovative approach to the stories that beat in the heart of an organization. Here are techniques and practical applications. At a deeper level the book shows a way of being in business and doing business. It will raise your Story IQ, so you can hear and tell your work life in a new and vital way.

The authors set out their complex and important themes with an impressive directness and clarity. They achieve this, by the simple, persuasive device of practising what they preach. For the narrative moves between argument and story in a seamless way which argues a deep but unobtrusive scholarship in the literatures, cultures and traditions of many societies.

The Halo and the Noose should be seen as an exciting further step in the long process of re-connecting business life to the mainstream of human history, experience and potential.

Ralph Windle, *founder/director : The Creative Value Network*

“This is the best book about leadership and business that I have seen in a long time. It is fresh, interesting, needed and written to reach out and touch the toughest part of each of us. This is not just about story telling, but more importantly, about how we can all change our story and create a future distinct from the past. Read this book”.

Peter Block, *author (Flawless Consulting) and consultant, Partner in Designed Learning, USA. Masters Degree in Industrial Administration (Yale)*

“A great piece of work which stimulates one to look at life differently – very useful for consultants, trainers and coaches; who can draw on the various aspects of storytelling in ways that traditional methods simply cannot”.

Angelo Kehayas, *CEO Profweb, Fellow Certified Management Consultant, BSc, MBA*



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