

American Values

An early study, based on an investigation into political speeches, was published in 1961 by Edward Steele and Charles Redding that identified a set of archetypical American values.

Puritan and pioneer morality

The world is made up of people who are good and bad, foul and fair. You are either one of the good guys or you are one of the bad guys. If you are not with us, you are against us.

Value of the individual

The individual has rights above that of general society and government. Success occurs at the level of the individual. People should not have to fight for their rights. The government should protect the rights of the individual, not the other way around.

Achievement and success

Success is measured by the accumulation of power, status, wealth and property. What you already have is not as important as what you continue to accumulate. A retired wealthy person was successful, but is now less admirable.

Change and progress

Change is inevitable. Progress is good and leads to success. If you do not keep up, you will fall behind. Newer is always better. The next version will be better than the last.

Ethical equality

All people are equal, both spiritually and in the opportunities they deserve. This includes differences in race, gender, disability, age, sexual preference and so on.

Effort and optimism

Hard work and striving is the key to success. The great American Dream of fame and fortune comes to those who work hard and never give up.

Efficiency, practicality and pragmatism

Solution is more important than ideology. Utility is more important than show. A key question to any idea is 'Will it work?'

So what?

Are these values still apparent? Values change very little. If you think they do, then this may give you an insight into how to communicate effectively with Americans. If you embody these values, they are more likely to look up to you. If you appeal to these values, they are likely to buy into your message.

If you think this is a damn fine set of values, they are probably your values -- and maybe you are an American (or at least you will easily agree with a lot of Americans).

Steele, E.D. and Redding, W.C. (1962). The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion, *Western Speech*, 26, 83-91

Four American Fears

Rupert Wilkinson describes four American fears that pervade the US culture.

1. The fear of being owned

Many of the American forefathers were escaping oppression in Europe and their fears has persisted such that there is now there is a deep distrust of centralized government and large institutions.

This helps to explain why Communism is distrusted and feared by Americans.

2. The fear of falling apart

Having build a large nation, they fear everything coming undone, as was threatened in the Civil War and is continued in the tensions between autonomy of states and the federal government.

This is expressed at the personal level with the need to have a perfect life with a perfect face, a perfect family etc. It is also about striving for identity and control in a turbulent world.

Mitroff (2005) adds the dimension of "blown apart" in the aftermath of 9/11, the fear that underlies abnormal accidents.

3. The fear of falling away

This fear is about losing their way and abandoning of the American dreams of the forefathers, including being the "moral beacon" of the world.

The original idea for America was relatively Utopian and there is a constant concern that this societal perfection will be eroded by the temptations of the material world.

4. The fear of winding down

This is a fear of losing the boundless energy of the forefathers which still pervades the dynamism of American business today.

The great American Dream of rags to riches (and subsequent social and global position) is widely accepted as being gained through enormous energy and diligence. When this fades through laziness or the greater energy of other countries, such as India or China, then the fear is increased.

So what?

So when persuading Americans, either play on these fears or align with them to show how you, too are concerned about these things.

See also

Rupert Wilkinson, R. (1988). *The Pursuit of American Character*, Harper & Row

Mitroff, Ian I. (2005). *Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger and Better from a Crisis: 7 Essential Lessons for Surviving Disaster*. AMACOM: American Management Association

Source: www.changingminds.org

The Use of Stories

What is the purpose of stories? Why do we need them? How do we use them? Here are four fundamental purposes of stories.

Safe arousal

At a most fundamental level, stories play to our fundamental need for arousal. They stimulate us as we feel the sense of danger and thrill of action created by the author.

At the same time as arousing, stories create a vicarious experience where we are aroused through an empathetic bond with the main characters (this is why 'sympathetic characters' are so important).

All action and adventure stories offer this 'safe danger' environment where the hero is subjected to a series of exciting hazards that can be safely consumed from our armchair.

Fantastic escape

Stories also provide a means of escape from the pressures of the real world as we immerse ourselves in the plot and the lives of the characters. This is a remarkably clever skill that most people have, where the real world fades as we enter the dream world of the story.

Wish fulfilment means doing the things that you would like to do but dare not or cannot do. Stories provide a perfect vehicle for such fantasy.

In the world of fantastic story, anything that can be imagined is possible. We can fight and survive incredible danger. We can have wonderful friends and beautiful partners. We can travel to the stars and meet strange new beings. We can have super powers that let us fly or cast magical spells.

Escapist stories include science fiction, fantasy, romance, body swap, and so on.

Therapeutic catharsis

Another use of stories is to help release inner tensions. When you see in front of you a re-enactment of a past problem then this experience can help you re-think and revise how you feel about it. For example a man who has been upset when rejected by a woman may be helped by a story that shows a man recovering from being rejected.

Catharsis is a triggered release of emotions that have been repressed or otherwise held back. When we do not release emotions they can build up inside and gnaw away at us. Stories can both trigger and facilitate release these emotions.

Problems can be things that have happened to you or things you have done that are wrong or bad. Therapists may use story as a way of helping a person get past a stuck problem from their past. One way is to tell stories of other people. Another is to encourage the person to tell their own story.

Stories of tragedy offer vehicles for catharsis as you cry with the characters, releasing pent-up grief. Comedy also provides simple catharsis as laughter allows release of inner tensions.

Cultural learning

Another important use of stories is to transfer knowledge and understanding. Rather than learn the hard way from bitter experience, it is far better to learn the lessons of the past.

Stories provide an easily-digestible and credible format for which to present the lessons of life.

This is a very traditional use of stories, for example where parents tell their children cautionary tales or where tribal elders relate cultural knowledge that are encoded in stories of monsters and magic. In the days before writing, much knowledge was embedded in stories and professional storytellers would travel the countryside spreading understanding and effectively acting as a peripatetic teacher.

Cultural stories can take many forms to transmit social knowledge. Children's stories embed basic cultural norms. Tales of heroes show how people should behave under stress. Villain stories warn against bad actions. Journey stories help transition to adulthood.

Story is...

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What is a story? When is story not a story? Here are three patterns that help define stories.

Plot and character

Stories are made up of characters who enact plots. The plot is the overall storyline which unfolds during the story. Characters are the people who stumble and develop through the story.

Good plots tell complete stories. They are interesting, exciting and ultimately satisfying. They may mystify but ultimately create revelation and understanding. A truly great story helps the audience develop and become better people.

The audience identifies with the protagonist or other sympathetic characters and recognizes antagonists from those in their own lives. In this way they enter the story as it mirrors reality (or maybe their fantasies) and in doing so helps them forward.

Tension and resolution

The basic device of any story is to create tension in the audience and then trigger closure by resolving the tension. Many tensions may be developed and resolved across the story. A number of others are left open and which may be resolved in the climactic conclusion. Yet other tensions may be left open, paving the way for a sequel.

Stories often use assorted devices to create and resolve tension. These are classic mechanisms by which messages are reliably transmitted to the audience.

Art and emotion

Stories are a form of art. Like all art, there is also structure, rule and science. An art student learns the rules of color and how to physically create these. They learn of classic techniques and the ways of the masters. If taught well, they learn without being trapped and slowly

develop their own style and artistic personality. They can then transcend the science and break rules to create new art.

Art is about emotion. Its purpose is to stimulate and arouse. If you walk past many well-executed paintings in a gallery and then stare at one work, whether it makes you happy or annoyed, it may be considered a greater work of art than those which are ignored. And perhaps those which stimulate positive emotion are greater than those which stimulate negative emotion.

Storytelling is the same. It starts with technique and science and ends in tactic art. It seeks to arouse emotions in its audience and perhaps cathartically release those which are bottled up.

Why is story so powerful?



The nature of stories

Stories have always existed – to entertain, teach, pass on wisdom, record history, represent beliefs, explore new ideas, share experiences, build community, and express creativity.

The story is the basic unit of learning and as such is very important from our earliest years, listening to stories from our parents and carers. The word, story, is derived from the Greek word meaning knowing, knowledge and wisdom. Human beings seem to have a natural tendency to think, speak, be receptive to, and process our experiences in story. The appeal of storytelling is the appeal of the imagination. When we listen to story it gives us the opportunity to create our own images, our own personal blend of imagined sights, sounds, feelings, and much more.

How we respond to story

Dialogue and discussion often stay at the level of the mind, but story can take us into the dimension of the heart. Stories appeal to both logic and emotion. We also learn much faster if information is delivered in story form, and remember stories much more readily than facts, statistics, or conceptual statements.

Hearing the stories of others breaks down the fears that underlie prejudice, and opens us up to the perspectives of others. Through story we see more easily the unique challenges of every individual, and how their beliefs and attitudes make sense within the context of their own experience. We may still disagree with a particular perspective but begin to see how that view makes sense within the story of that person's life. As a result, we tend not to argue with story as we might with opinion.

Stories change the 'contract' with the listener. Less is demanded of us: There is less need to comment, respond or engage; we are allowed simply to listen. As a result we often let our defenses down, become less critical and more open. Similarly, many traditional storytellers see their audiences melt into a slightly dreamy state as they enter the world of imagination and surrender to the world of the story journey. This effect is mirrored in our brain chemistry, which produces a predominance of alpha waves, associated with daydreaming and release from stress.

Why we tell stories

We express our life experience by telling stories. We instinctively transform what happens to us into traditional story structure. Stories help us digest what happens to us and make sense of it. Story connects us to the meaning underlying our experience, or helps us to construct that meaning. It often reveals what we share in common, and what it means to be human. Telling our stories can be an important part of healing from difficult experiences. We make experiences manageable by sharing them with others, and we come to terms with loss and pain through repeatedly telling the story.

Types of story

Personal narrative: Often we use story to organize and extract meaning from the things that happen to us. We 're-package' our experiences as stories with a beginning, middle and end so we can better make sense of them and share them with others.

Conflicting narratives: Of particular interest to community building is the way in which people in conflict can hold different stories about events and their meanings. Working with these opposing narratives is essential to conflict transformation.

Collective stories: These are the stories we share with our families, communities and nations. Collective stories are based on shared histories or belief systems. They illustrate and underpin our values and how we see the world. Traditional stories: Traditional stories include folk tales, fairy tales, myths and legends.

Archetypal stories: Some forms of traditional story, religious story and myth have a deep symbolic resonance and capture something essential about the human experience. They represent themes that recur in cultures across the world. The psychologist Carl Jung saw archetypal stories as having a profound effect on our unconscious minds. According to Jung, archetypes exist within the collective consciousness of a particular culture or of the human race as a whole.

Religious stories: Faith-based stories cannot be described in the same language as traditional stories, as it is not possible (or advisable) to label them as fiction. Within their traditions they are understood to express profound truth. Some are said to be divinely inspired. Some religious stories are historical accounts of actual events, some are created for teaching purposes, while others offer symbolic metaphors about the nature of reality. Many have an archetypal dimension. Religious stories that are not strictly historical are sometimes referred to as myths. There can be a lot of debate about which story falls into which category.

Narrative as organizing principle: The term 'narrative' is increasingly used to express individual or collective beliefs, expectations or thought processes. Narrative in this sense refers to the mental organizing structures we use to understand, digest and store information. Our narratives can reflect traditional story structures or may simply refer to a set of established thought processes around a particular theme.

Meta-narrative: This is an overarching story which explains or gives meaning to an aspect of our reality.

Source: St. Ethelburga's Center for Reconciliation and Peace,
<https://www.stethelburgas.org/narrative-resource/why-story-so-powerful>

Stories are part of human culture. Human beings have told stories since before we invented writing!

Here's what one expert has to say about storytelling:

Storytelling is a part of life, intrinsic to most cultures. They help people make sense of the world--life's experiences, dilemmas and hardships. Stories can educate, inspire and build rapport. They are a means of communicating, recreating, and helping preserve cultures by translating memories into a more concrete manner that can be handed down verbally or in written form. Telling the story can provide the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one's experiences and oneself.

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