

*In dit artikel maakt Richard House de wereld een stuk overzichtelijker door hem te lijf te gaan met behulp van verhaalthema's en archetypen. Een boeiende toepassing van storytelling als middel om grip te krijgen op de dingen om je heen. Dit is een eerste artikel uit een reeks, zoals House aankondigt. Ik houd je graag op de hoogte.*

*Annet Scheringa*

## **Rags to Riches, Voyage and Return, and Overcoming the Monster: In search of our Seven Universal Stories.**

*Richard House, june 2011*

This is the first in a series of posts about universal or archetypal stories that drive our collective consciousness, influencing the destiny of nations, of companies, of leaders and individuals like you and me.

The text is a bit long as the opening chapter of this subject is a monster. Bear with me! It's a huge subject that can't be tackled in one sitting – and which depends shamelessly upon the scholarship of thinkers and tellers of 'stories about stories' many times wiser than I.

Isaac Newton, the rock band Oasis and Britain's two-pound coin all share one thing in common. Their fame rests (in part) upon their use of the phrase 'standing on the shoulders of giants.' The giant upon whose shoulders I avowedly stand for the purposes of storytelling is Christopher Booker.

A well-thumbed copy of his 2004 masterwork *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we tell stories* should occupy pride of place on the desk of every speechwriter, coach and guide to the creation of effective stories.

This book does for storytelling what Linnaeus did for biology. It doesn't simply create a workable, seven-layer matrix into which every single powerful human story can be segmented and fitted – Booker goes on to parse and docket just about every compelling story the world has ever known and passed on, from the 5,000 year old *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *Lord of the Rings* and *The Simpsons*.

As Booker himself acknowledges in his introduction, the 30 year task of writing his book in turn drew upon the work of even greater pioneers, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Joseph Campbell, Bruno Bettelheim.

The Seven Basic Plots are:

- Overcoming the Monster
- Rags to Riches
- The Quest
- Voyage and Return
- Comedy
- Tragedy
- Rebirth

My purpose isn't just to write about this universal "storytelling system" (buy the book if you want that) or even to write about storytellers.

Paradoxically, the professional storyteller himself can be transfixingly dull. Think of the Ancient Mariner who holds the wedding-guest in thrall in Coleridge's eponymous poem. Or the blind, androgynous Tyresias of *The Odyssey*. Or, worst of all, Doctor Casaubon in George Eliot's Victorian epic *Middlemarch*. This repressive villain's dry-as-dust academic search for a "key to all mythologies" is a bit like Booker's own project, which at 705 pages, is a bit heavy for holiday reading.

Just collecting and pinning dead stories on a card to label isn't the point. Nor is this a literary version of 'Trivial Pursuit.'

This is about *dynamic* usage of the power in this system. A few well-chosen words cause stories to arise, that set us on course to change the world.

My purpose is analytical only in the sense of asking "how do stories help to change the world?"

The best place to start is with world leaders. What they do affects all of us – and the chains of cause and effect are clearly visible in history as it unfolds before us in the media.

So my first article investigates how leaders consciously use narratives to shape our destiny. In the coming weeks I hope I'll be able to explain some of Booker's thinking.

## **Part 1. After The Bushwars: Obama the Storyteller**

As Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama was criticized by military strategists for announcing the withdrawal of 33,000 US soldiers from Afghanistan in his "peace with honour" speech delivered 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

Forget strategy, think mass psychology. As Storyteller in Chief, Obama signalled a much more profound change to the US national narrative, with a deftness of touch that is the mark of a true leader. It was as though Americans turned on the TV expecting a tired re-run of *Jaws*, and instead previewed a glittering Broadway version of *Cinderella*.

After two decades of war and a trillion dollars in lost treasure it was now time, Obama said, to “reclaim the American dream that is at the center of our story.” One narrative has been exhausted, so another must begin.

Out goes “Overcoming the Monster” — the reigning mythology of the twin Bush presidencies, and in comes a lighter, brighter new script – “Rags to Riches.”

Why? Because the monster is dead. The killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2<sup>nd</sup> brought to a virtual end to that most primal of story patterns which lie at the basis of our universal consciousness. The attempt at world domination by that terrifying monster of the early English *Beowulf* saga, by successive villains in James Bond films, by the Gorgon Medusa in Greek myth, or by the Transylvanian *Dracula*, has been crushed.

Right has triumphed. “The light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance. These long wars will come to a responsible end,” said Obama. However much the generals huff and puff about the clear and present danger of the Taliban, it is time to go home.

Why? Because, like Ulysses returning after long years of wandering, the work of nation-building must resume in a land whose central myth lies tarnished and whose values have been degraded.

Just as in Ithica, there is chaos at home. The American dream – that anyone can rise from obscurity to a place in the sun – must be redeemed. While both Bushes pointedly ignored the 1832 advice of John Quincy Adams, (“America ... goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy”), Obama is attempting to return to the sanity laid out in Adams’ mighty address to Congress.

When Obama spoke of “common purpose,” and “nation-building here at home,” he was inviting a new breed of hero – or heroine – to walk the stage of America’s national consciousness. Step forward *Aladdin* of the Lamp, Eliza Doolittle from *My Fair Lady*, Dicken’s *David Copperfield*, Dick Whittington with his cat, and in pride of place of course, *Cinderella*.

Men and women now mired in the debt-heavy ashes of America’s national kitchen, beleaguered by joblessness, deficits and partisan divisions of internecine intensity, will win the fine clothes they deserve and finally go to the glittering ball. The three Ugly Sisters (of Wall Street and K Street and Main Street) will be frustrated.

The healing power of comedy replaces the searing catharsis of foreign war. Confusion routed, the family will be reunited as at the end of the *Marriage of Figaro*,

or *The Taming of the Shrew*. No wonder some commentators contrasted Obama's address with that Richard Nixon's 1973 message ending the Vietnam War.

As my former Washington Post colleague, columnist Jackson Diehl astutely noted, "an address about troop withdrawals was sounding a lot like a campaign stump speech." He has left it dangerously late, but after a mandate's worth of disappointments, Obama is returning the almost-forgotten agenda laid out in his January 2009 inaugural, when he promised to "put aside childish things" and "remake America."

Obama is good with a story – but he's not infallible. During his January 2011 State of the Nation speech he was caught with one red hand in the storyteller's cookie-jar when he called for a "Sputnik moment" to reignite America's technological prowess. Obama was spotted blatantly trying to copy John F Kennedy's successful exploitation of another primal story; The Voyage and Return.

The story worked for Kennedy – and for America. His 1962 "we choose to go to the moon" speech ushered in the NASA programs that in turn drove America's economic ascendancy through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

America may not have been first into space – but unlike the USSR, NASA brought (almost all) its heroes home. Most famously in the 1995 thriller *Apollo 13* with Tom Hanks.

Safe return to the "normal" world, after high and strange adventures, is the *sine qua non* of this great story family. Think of HG Wells' *The Time Machine*, *The Wizard of Oz*, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and of course *Robinson Crusoe*. From the dream-like "otherness" of outer space, heroes bring back precious knowledge and gifts (characterised by those fragments of moon-rock).

But – just as the Bush narrative of Taming the Monster was made redundant by Osama bin Laden's death, so the final shuttle flight planned for July, is turning the last page on this incarnation of Voyage and Return. Obama got roundly panned by his critics: today's vision-impaired America can only see Voyage and Return stories as a costly indulgence.

So, as we've seen, Obama looked to the tattered American Dream and wisely picked Rags to Riches from the playbook. As his Democrat predecessor Bill Clinton told himself every morning when on campaign "it's the economy, stupid."

Are story archetypes useful only in decoding the national affairs of the United States? Of course not.

Examine the recent speeches of the beleaguered Greek premier George Papandreou. He has crafted the narrative of Greece's current financial agony with reference to that most epic of struggles: the invasion of his country by an army of Persians in 490 BC. The ensuing Battle of Marathon defined the early stages of our

western history, creating the myth of endurance. Papandreou, a runner himself, uses Marathon as a symbol.

Papandreou may be Athenian, but Greeks have not been scared to insert him into the Spartan myth of the 300 warriors who held the pass at Thermopylae a decade later in 480 BC, frustrating the Persian king Xerxes and his army of two million soldiers. Patriotic Greeks see Papandreou as holding the thin line against an alien horde of creditors. The subject of a gruesome 2006 animation movie, the 300 myth is a variant of 'Overcoming the Monster' in which the Spartans snatch the victory of immortal fame from their defeat.

There's another narrative of victory, of course, characterised by The Quest.

Mostly, we think about Quest stories in terms of great journeys: *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Aeneid*, *Lord of the Rings*. Don't forget the *Indiana Jones* movies. Or Philip Pullman's superb *Dark Materials* trilogy which achieves the feat of blending *Paradise Lost* with Blake's Prophetic Books – all in a page-turner.

Yet when it comes to national destiny, politicians regularly use Quest stories to embody a desired goal for which we hunger and toward which we can move together as a society. This is the "civis" of national identity and citizenship.

Ronald Reagan several times adapted the 17<sup>th</sup> century English Puritan John Winthrop's words to craft his vision of a divine plan for America in his Shining City on the Hill speech. In fact Reagan followed Kennedy in his first use of it as early as 1974. Later, he used it to accept the Republican Party re-nomination in 1984 and then again in his farewell speech to the nation in 1989.

In his "Finest Hour" speech of 1940, Winston Churchill promised Britons that after victory over Hitler, "the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands." This quest for a shared space characterised by light, airiness, and freedom is universal.

So, as the bombs rained down on Chile's Moncada Palace in September 1973 during the Pinochet military coup, president Salvador Allende, machine-gun in one hand and microphone in the other, delivered a final broadcast in which he promised a vision of the restored free city as the apex of civilisation. The darkness of dictatorship would one day pass, he promised, to restore a new day on which "great avenues will again be opened, through which will pass the free man, to construct a better society." And so it came to be.

As you can see, The Quest is just one of the powerful narratives that global leaders consciously use for the purpose mobilising and transforming national destinies. Can we use their example?

In the next post, I'll look at how stories change the lives and destinies not of nations but of another great collective being – the company or enterprise. How CEOs can make practical use these power stories is the subject of forthcoming blogs.