

Narrative Intelligence

Edited by
Michael Mateas and
Phoebe Sengers

Advances in Consciousness Research

46

John Benjamins Publishing Company

VITAL NARRATIVES

Brenda Laurel*

American culture has a hole in its heart. Vital narrative forms that nurture and define us are vanishing. Our culture also has a hole in its head. We are unclear about the epistemological roots of the various forms of narrative we are exposed to, and, more important, we are befuddled about how to judge what sorts of actions might appropriately flow from these narratives.

This is an opinion piece. The paper is fundamentally about different kinds of narratives that I think we need and some that I think we need to change in the world today. It is about a certain kind of narrative literacy that can help people to form more complex and appropriate narratives for their lives. I am focused on kids and teens as an audience because they are the future, but I think that the analysis applies to adults as well.

Any of the types of narratives I discuss here can be represented as interactive fiction, games, or web-based content. In the case of a story that is written or told, the widely accepted reader-response theory says that the reader plays an active role in constructing the story. Readers find ways to make good stories personally relevant. Empathy, for example, plays a key role in the construction of relevance.

In interactive media, the reader's role in construction is more pronounced. It is important that the form not get in the way of this act of construction. Elements of personal agency – that is, the ability to do something with the material in the real or virtual world – is a key to engaging kids in interactive narrative. That said, I leave the formal questions to others (for a change) and look in this paper at the content and intent of various kinds of stories as they provide scaffolding for constructing meaning and deriving actionable goals.

Storytelling as Relationship

Story is an object; *storytelling* is a relationship. The statement that we are lacking certain genres of vital stories really means that we are missing certain kinds of vital relationships.

A few years ago, one of the questions I asked in the context of a larger research project on kids was, do your parents tell you stories? Many kids said that their parents read them stories, but very few said their parents told them stories. Children's literature can be seen as a set of tales tailored in a general way to the needs and questions of kids. When a parent reads a child a story (or belongs to a parent-child book club, for example) then the relationship is present indirectly in the reading. Parents *should* read to their children.

But children also need personal narratives to connect them to their relatives, friends, their culture, and other world-views. It emerged in my research that the family storyteller was often the grandmother or other relative in a family who could tell "remember when" stories. But as families are more often separated geographically, the elder storyteller may not be able

* This essay appears in *Narrative Intelligence*, Phoebe Sengers and M. Mateas, Eds., John Benjamin Books, 2003, 91-111.

to form storytelling relationships. This is one way in which the technologies of telecommunications might serve us well. Certainly, the disappearance of rural life contributes to the disappearance of storytelling. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the number of Americans engaged in farming has shrunk from 50% to 2%. Along with them go the rural cultures the fostered storytelling.

Doubtless, many parents tell their kids stories about their own youth, as cautionary tales, for instance. But how do we talk to our children about our lives now? How do we speak – figuratively or literally – about our own beliefs and ethics? One kind of storytelling relationship that children often lack is the stories of parent’s lives and work, the choices that must be made, the difficulties that must be faced, the joys of doing a job well. Such stories help children understand what it is to be an adult, and to expose children to the constructions that an adult must have to navigate the world.

Another blow to the culture of American storytelling has been struck by media, beginning with radio and silent film. As every parent of a preschooler knows, the temptation is great to allow television (the blessed kind, like “Children’s Television Workshop”) act as a babysitter and source of education. All well and good, except for the relationship part. Kids have pretend relationships with characters, but that is not the same thing as a relationship with a person. This, too, can be addressed in some ways by technology; for example, on personal storytelling websites like Bubbe’s Back Porch [www.bubbe.com] and The Fray [www.fray.com]. There are even websites for kids to tell and hear stories about various social problems like bullying [see, for example, www.bullying.org].

In cultures where storytelling holds a significant place, storytellers choose tales to address the needs or context of their listeners. Native lore of all sorts falls in this category. The performance is live and responsive. Stories told by films or TV shows or even books do not possess the same quality of responsiveness or personal connection. Again, movies, TV, and books provide many excellent stories for children (and many damaging ones). But such the stories and media of popular culture cannot be substituted for the storytelling relationships that children also need. One way I propose to analyze our genres of stories, then, is along the axis of relationships.

Other Criteria for Evaluating Stories

During our research for Purple Moon, a company that I co-founded in 1996 to create interactive CD-ROMs and web materials for girls, we learned that personal relevance was an important key to creating stories that engage young people [1]. As a mother of three teen girls, I have heard over and over again that they find no personal relevance in history, science, or math. Nowhere in the curriculum is it specified that a teacher has the responsibility of helping young people see why the subject matter is important or how it connects with their lives. This is the axis of personal relevance.

Many kinds of stories are told for strategic reasons. The desired outcomes are changes of opinion or belief, or action on the part of the hearer. Ancient and contemporary generals tell stories to motivate troops. Mothers Against Drunk Driving have stories that galvanize

opposition to drunk driving. Political commercials tell stories that attempt to persuade voters to elect particular candidates. This is the axis of strategy and outcomes.

A fourth axis may be thought of as epistemological – that is, the truth value of a story and the way that we determine that value. I would like to look at several genres of stories present in our culture and to evaluate them along these four axes. Through this exercise we may think about the effects of existing kinds of stories and identify some kinds of stories that seem to be missing. Please remember that my evaluations are subjective, based primarily on my own observations as a student of culture, and not on any body of research. I would propose that such research might be very valuable in our ongoing efforts to tune our narrative universe.

Religious Narratives

Starting with perhaps the most complex kind of story, I want to look at religious narratives. They are of great value to believers. They provide guidance and the comfort of faith. Religious narratives may also bring believers to face very difficult decisions as dictated by the ethics and morality of their faith. Religious stories are often deployed by priests, leaders, or believers in strategic and relational ways. Storytelling relationships are formed when people read scripture to address particular life issues for the hearer, deploying sacred text as a *story*, to connected by the hearer to his or her life through narrative intelligence. But a demonstration of the trouble that can be caused by religious narratives seems always to be at hand, and none is more immediate than the current conflict in the Middle East.

By religious narratives, I mean canonical holy books or stories. In the big three patriarchal monotheistic religions – Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – the canonical narratives are easily identifiable, although each has been through centuries of reworking, intentional or otherwise. There are two ways that the faithful look at these texts. Those who look at them through the exercise of narrative intelligence will find story, history, metaphor, and other devices employed to make certain ethical and moral points clear. Those who look at them literally - fundamentalist believers – see them as having a truth value that is higher than all other stories. So, for example, the religious guarantees made by canonical narratives regarding the “ownership” of land claimed by both Palestinians and Jews have a higher truth value for the faithful than human narratives of suffering, historical narratives of occupation, or scientific narratives of genetic identity. Young people need to be challenged to question the literal truth of religious narrative and to explore how they might be applied in nuanced and open-ended ways.

How religious narratives rank on the four axes we’ve identified depends almost entirely on the whether how the reader approaches the text. For the fundamentalist, we get one set of evaluations and a very different set from those who are believers but do not take the scriptures literally. Indeed, because of fundamentalism, religious stories tend to displace or forbid other forms of narrative from coming into play. Interestingly, the Catholic church stashes its non-canonical narratives in the lives of saints. This and its rituals hint at the pagan context in which the Church was born and established itself in medieval European and other pagan cultures.

In terms of relationship, both fundamentalists and the more open-minded faithful find high relationship value in religious stories – relationship with God, and relationship with the community of believers. Those fundamentalists with contrasting beliefs (e.g., Jew vs. Muslim) are placed in extremely negative relationships with one another. The non-fundamentalist faithful are more likely to allow other kinds of knowledge to provide a context for their exercise of faith. The relationships that religious narratives call for with those outside the faith depends on the particular narrative. For example, compassion plays a large role in most Christian faiths, but this aspect in action has historically been thwarted by the requirement to evangelize, bringing disease and despair to many native peoples.

Religious narratives have high personal relevance for both fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist believers. They also have high (negative) personal relevance to combatants in religious wars. For those outside the faith, personal relevance is a function of exposure, context, and pre-existing relationship.

Religious narratives are often invoked in calls to action. For example, Christians and Jews are exhorted to obey the ten commandments. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are required to actively evangelize. In many faiths at different times and places, religious narratives are invoked to require war or persecution. Examples are the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the ongoing conflict between Jews and Palestinians in Israel.

Many young people in areas of conflict around the world are exposed only to religious narratives and calls to battle at home and at school. This sort of brainwashing was present at least as early as the Children's Crusades, and probably long, long before. The political or strategic narratives that are drummed into these children grow out of religious narratives. These narratives are likely to inherit the authority of true belief and preclude alternative ways of thinking about conflict or personal agency. An extremely difficult but enormously valuable goal would be to introduce these single-minded young people to other sorts of narratives that engage their narrative intelligence, critical thinking skills, and compassion or empathy.

Some religious institutions are more accepting of other kinds of stories to inform both spiritual practice and, in the case of strategic narratives, broaden the search space for solutions to problems. The Episcopal and Unitarian churches in the United States are good examples. In these institutions, the fundamentalism of true belief is tempered by a view of religious texts as guidelines for ethics and morality rather than literal truths.

Religious narratives can also give birth to cultural narratives that provide structure and guidance for everyday life. They are derivative of religious belief without the constraints of fundamentalism. The cultural narratives of Judaism, for example, provide rituals and shape communities that are also able to admit of other sorts of narrative in thinking about the world. Strategically, concentrating on these derivative narratives – political, cultural, and ethical – tends to relax the stranglehold of true belief.

Folklore, Spiritual and Pagan Narratives

Spiritual and pagan narratives and folklore stand in contrast to religious narratives in several ways. In such narratives, stories are understood more symbolically and metaphorically, giving broader participation to the reader. They are coded to refer to various aspects of life without necessarily being taken literally. Some examples are some of the spiritual narratives of Buddhism, Hinduism, and first-people's stories, and even some of the folklore that is now invoked around Christian holidays, such as the stories about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or Halloween. Characteristically, such stories are identified by religious fundamentalists as "pagan." The term has been applied in a derogatory tone by monotheistic religion to groups that are polytheistic (e.g. Hindu), poetically theistic (e.g. Wicca), or non-theistic (e.g. "folk").

"Pagan" continues to be a troubling word for many people. In Germany and France, for example, the term today translates into something like "skinhead." I use the term here in its original context, meaning literally, "of the land." Paganism characteristically involves highly articulated relationships with nature and tends to be quite specific in the value of local landscape. Celtic pagans associated spirits and stories with natural locations like wells, springs, and groves. Antique pagans (Greek and Roman) tended to associate their deities with qualities rather than locations, but sacred locations like Delphi and what is now Bath were also honored with local deities. One of the ways that the Romans pacified conquered peoples was to place statues of their local deities in Rome along with their own pantheon. In Shinto practice, still widely popular in Japan, deities and spiritual beings are most often tied to places. Confucian stories express a strictly ordered set of "right relations" and responsibilities among people, families, clans, and the state.

On a tour of Chaco Canyon years ago, I learned from my guide (an anthropologist) that the creation stories of the Anasazi and their progeny were probably told so that the landmarks in the story were visible from where the teller stood. The point, he mused, was probably that a child should be able to see where the world began and to think of where she stood as a place where spiritual power was strong. Here in the San Francisco Bay Area, many local native people place the creation at Mount Diablo or Mount Tamalpais, clearly visible before the days of pollution from almost anywhere in the region. Thousands of such examples exist all over the world.

Contemporary pagan practices in the United States come in many flavors [2]. Some, based primarily on Alistair Crowley and the Golden Dawn movement, have strict liturgies that call upon pagan gods of Celtic or Roman origin and stand close to "true belief." Others are more syncretic, drawing upon lore and ritual from a variety of sources, including Native American stories. Some invent stories and rituals related to their own locations and communities.

From Aesop's Fables (written by a Roman slave) to stories of Coyote, Bear, Anansi and other tricksters to stories of faeries and trolls, pagan spiritual stories and folklore often rely on non-human characters to stand in for aspects of human behavior. Other characters, like

the Navajo Rainbow Woman, the Corn Maidens, or Grandmother Spider stand in for aspects of cosmology. In Celtic paganism, characters like Cernunnos and the triple goddess stand in for the mysteries and cycles of nature and work as symbolic cosmologies.

Many religious narratives, such as the injunction against cutting down an olive grove, probably have their roots in lore that addressed the exigencies of life long before they were incorporated by the present religion. Likewise, many Catholic saints such as Brigid and Sophia were likely appropriated from pre-Christian folklore.

Pagan stories attempt to capture aspects of humanity's relationship to the natural world, the solar cycles and the cycles of agriculture, and husbandry of the land and its creatures. They exercise our narrative intelligence to combine knowledge, intuition, and ethics with respect for the Mysteries of consciousness, creation, and purpose. Many spiritual tales, folklore, and pagan stories exhibit pro-environmental or Gaian qualities. Typically, such stories represent the world as a complete living being, including animals, humans, plants, and landscape into the same system. The tendency is to seek for right relationships with each and all.

Pagan practitioners of all sorts (including native people) have, of course, a high positive relationship with their communities and typically, with the Earth or a Great Spirit as well as with the characters in their narratives. Believers in patriarchal religion typically have a negative reaction to paganism because it comes into conflict with their faith, and because some groups – for example, fundamentalist Christians, may associate paganism with Satan through ignorance of actual pagan practice. Non-practitioners may dip into folklore to address the particular needs of a child through a storytelling relationship (e.g., telling the story of Little Red Riding Hood to a girl who feels powerless).

As with religion, for the practitioner of pagan spirituality personal relevance pervades everyday life. Non-fundamentalist believers and non-religious people tend to be more tolerant, capable of gleaning wisdom from pagan stories and folklore (as well as from religious texts) through narrative intelligence.

For the practitioners, pagan narratives and their implicit ethics inform action in the world and contemplation of one's relationship to nature. Some non-pagans may view strategy and outcomes are relatively more positive because the spiritual narratives and folklore often come to conclusions that are coherent with non-believers' political and ethical stances. For most, the strategy and outcomes of pagan practice are not well understood and, as such, the response tends to be negative.

In regards to truth value, it should be remembered that some native people and pagans treat their narratives as religion while others see them as guidelines for spiritual practice. Religious pagans may privilege their narratives in the same way that other religious fundamentalists do. By contrast, spiritual practitioners can typically also accept scientific and historical narratives as having equal truth value. For believers in other religions, pagan narratives are often seen as negative or even dangerous. Even so, the pagan revival or neo-pagan movement in the United States is strengthened by its relationship with nature. Many contemporary environmentalists and "folk" sense a measure of truth in the pagan attitude toward the natural world.

Spiritual, folk, and pagan stories are some of the vital narratives that we are in danger of losing. The trend toward globalization, the disappearance of diverse cultures and their stories, and the overriding narratives of religion, defense, development and economic “growth” put these forms at risk.

Scientific Narratives

Like many spiritual narratives and pagan stories, scientific narratives can be characterized as dialogues with nature. The tools of science are based on rationality rather than story and ritual. Both scientists and pagans honor the natural world, and both understand the existence of Great Mysteries. The writings of such scientists as Newton, Einstein, and Feynman are aglow with wonder and joy.

In 1972, Joseph Campbell described the change in consciousness that resulted from our first view of the earth from space [3]. Seeing our blue planet alone in the starry blackness, Campbell says, we suddenly understood that rather than coming *into* this world, we come *out* of it, or as Alan Watts put it, "as a vine grapes, so the Earth peoples" [4]. The scientific understanding of Gaia as an organism was first explored Vladimir Vernadsky in 1944-45 [5] and later articulated by James Lovelock [6]. Lovelock strove to construct a scientific narrative that demonstrated the Earth to be a whole living being, of which we are co-dependent parts. Taken together with Campbell and Watts' narrative inversions, Lovelock's work, extended by works of such scientists as Lyn Margulis and Dorion Sagan [7], enhanced the impact of the Gaia hypothesis, both as a new line of scientific thinking and a new story for our relationship to our planet.

Scientific narratives always appear in situated contexts, often involving struggles to assert scientific findings in ways that do not offend religious institutions. Galileo, Copernicus, Darwin, and countless others have engaged in such struggles. In contrast, Newton thought that “Nature” was ‘God’s book’ – and that by reading Nature’s “laws”, he could come closer to the mind – and purpose – of the Christian God [8]. Relatively few modern scientists hold this view; most simply assume the existence of an external world, eschewing solipsism, and want to know How It Works.

The theory of evolution provides an excellent example. From the Victorian era to the present day, the tendency of evolution to move toward greater complexity has been popularly misunderstood to mean that evolution moves toward greater perfection. Many believe evolution to be the unfolding according to God’s Divine Plan, which culminates in Man.

But contemporary scientists like Lyn Margulis and Stephen Jay Gould [9] see things differently. Their research suggests that evolution is neither the unfolding of a divine plan nor the inevitable march of sentience toward more and more spectacular manifestations. Devolution – or a movement toward less complexity – is also part of the process. And for humanity, like countless species that have disappeared over the millennia, extinction is a real possibility. Evolution is a process, not an outcome.

The particular sort of self-reflective consciousness that humans have seems unique on Earth. But as Margulis and Sagan argue, the most ancient microorganisms “invented” us through the process of evolution. Our consciousness is a manifestation, not exclusively of human brains, but of the entire biosphere, including the microcosmic life that surrounds and inhabits our own bodies. The biblical text in which God places Man in dominion over the natural world creates an attempt to separate humans from the rest of Nature. Gaians, environmentalists, and most scientists disagree.

Scientific narratives encounter resistance from many sources on religious grounds. Others see science as the tool of economic imperialism; for example, the ongoing arguments about the patenting of seeds and the genetic engineering of foods. Resistance also comes from fear of change and the unknown. When science explains something that was heretofore mysterious and for which “folk” or religious explanations had been employed, many resist what they see as an assault on their beliefs. And yet, as science proceeds, the realm of Mystery is not reduced but redefined.

Many forget that the history of science shows that scientific findings and theories change as more is known and better tools are invented. An interesting difference between scientific and other kinds of narratives, as Karl Popper pointed out [10], is that scientific narratives are disprovable. While the narrative of an almighty God or the existence of Faeries underground cannot be disproved, scientific findings can be – and often are. Disproving an antiquated scientific narrative (like geocentrism or the idea that the continents have always been where they are now) might be a very good way to engage students in the process and epistemology of science.

Scientists are explorers. Some go down 5,000 feet in bathyspheres to see things that have heretofore been unseen, and they come back and report to us. Others walk on the moon. My reason for placing scientific stories among the other forms I treat in this chapter is that I believe that they are powerful tools, and they present fundamentally different ways of knowing than other kinds of stories.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to acceptance of scientific narratives is the language in which they are cast. One must understand scientific language to some degree to interpret the raw narratives of science – that is, the research papers, books, and specialized periodicals in which scientific narratives appear. Both scientific journalism and scientific educational materials attempt to make science accessible to the general public. Sometimes this works. But generally, one might say that journalistic reports often err on the side of sensationalism, while science textbooks fail to establish personal relevance. In some ways, interactive simulation as a form of scientific narrative can reduce or eliminate these pitfalls.

The response of many K-12 students to science teaching is, “why should I care?” Every teacher of science must be prepared to tell stories that answer this fundamental question. In educational and popular contexts, scientific information needs to be supported by particular attention to personal relevance. For example, in 2000-2001, my first-year graduate students in Media Design at Art Center College of Design devoted themselves to helping teens understand the human genome [11]. Our first interviews with high school students indicated a fairly low level of knowledge and interest in the topic. But when we came to those same students with questions regarding policy, applications, and ethical questions that were

associated with the science, we uncovered strong interest and a willingness of students to construct their own personal relevance. Our response was to create a trans-media system that incorporated such “hooks” for personal relevance into the scientific material.

Scientific narratives are a kind of vital narrative that faces many challenges in contemporary cultures. Its characteristic inaccessibility leads many to defer to business and government to determine the proper uses of science and the policies governing the directions and outcomes of scientific exploration. Religious communities and others based on a shared sense of oppression (as in some flavors of feminist separatism) see the assertion of truth value in science as an attack or an extension of the patriarchy. Increasingly, however, the practice of good citizenship relies upon scientific literacy. Science may be rated differently on our axes if we make certain changes in how it is represented (narrated) and taught.

In terms of students and the general public, the axis of relationship can be boosted by more scientists making narratives directed at this audience. Such scientists as Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould and Stephen Hawking have created a “scientist as hero” image through their accessible, popular works, although they have had to endure derision for “pandering to the public” from the professional community. Certainly, more women scientists who achieve notoriety or take up the challenge of writing directly for a general audience from time to time would strengthen the appeal of science to girls and women.

Science writers like Margaret Wertheim and Matt Ridley also help to make scientific narrative accessible. Strategy and outcomes for science are high in visible areas like medicine, space exploration, and robotics. Personal relevance can be spread throughout science by beginning with highly relevant topics; for example, AIDS prevention, genetic engineering, or weather and climate. Popular culture can also play a part to address relevance through films like *Gattica* and good speculative fiction by authors like Greg Bear (e.g., *Darwin's Radio*), as well as popular science literature and news coverage.

Personal encounters with science, in environment such as the Exploratorium in San Francisco or through in-class experimentation and field work, may be the most powerful way to engage kids in science. Los Gatos High School uses this approach in their curriculum. Freshman science classes that are intended for the non-honors students are focused on environmental and space science – down and dirty, up and out. These provide “hooks” of personal relevance for the reluctant science student.

At the John Woolman School, a Quaker institution, students do a service project related to science each year. These projects range from beach clean-ups to counting tortoises in the Mojave desert and working on ways to prevent dirt bikes from killing tortoises and disturbing their habitats. Science melds with action and activism in such projects and can prove quite rewarding and enlightening to students. The aspects of wonder, joy, and service can be incorporated into a “field curriculum” for science. The tools of handheld technology may greatly enhance the ability of students to do scientific work in the field.

Historical Narratives

On May 10, 2002, *The New York Times* reported that “At a time when ancient cultures and conflicts are increasing American involvement around the world, American students show a poor command of history....” [12] In my experience as a researcher and parent, it seems that history is taught primarily as “chronicle” – that is, as an exercise in remembering dates and names. It seems that causality, ethics, politics, personal stories and oral history are not adequately explored in many classrooms. The antithesis to the typical classroom experience is something like the Holocaust Museum, which contains many different kinds of narratives and artifacts to help visitors to see the whole picture.

One of the reasons that history often takes the form of chronicle is the desire to avoid highly colored points of view. History attempts to be “objective.” Yet the actual events and experiences that history tries to represent are most often enormous conflicts in values, political or nationalist narratives, and points of view. Erasing these “subjective” differences removes the heart of history. Of course, personal stories, journals, and oral history are primary materials that can give emotional and political views into the complexities of history.

In the *Guides* project at Apple in 1990, Tim Oren, Abbe Don and I worked on a system for presenting different points of view on history in a computerized database [13]. We worked with the concept of “Guides” – characters who represented different points of view – as ways of navigating the information. In addition to encyclopedic content, the database was peppered with personal stories, and the “Guides” had stories of their own to tell. Our subject was Westward Movement, and the “Guides” consisted of a Native American, a pioneer woman, and a trader/trapper, each performed by real people. A particular Guide would suggest articles or stories that supported his or her point of view.

Oral histories and personal stories abound on the Web. Many university and high school communities as well as libraries have launched efforts to collect oral histories of U.S. veterans. The results are rich community websites in which living people reported their own experiences of the war. Oral histories can also be present in the classroom. The best history teacher I ever had was a man who had been a prisoner of war during World War II. His first statement to the class was, “everything is relative.” By that he did not mean that all belief systems were equal, but rather that historical events are connected to all kinds of forces – political, economic, cultural, religious – and so the understanding of history deepens when these dependencies are understood.

Biographies and autobiographies provide emotionally rich sources for understanding how and why things happened in the past. Examples include *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* by H. W. Brand and *A Son of Thunder: Patrick Henry and the American Republic* by Henry Mayer, and *Marie Curie: A Life* by Susan Quinn.

We all know the old saw, “History is written by the winners.” In that context alternative views take on even greater importance. When I was young, colonialism and Westward Movement were presented only from the perspective of the dominant cultures involved. It has only been through my personal studies that I have managed to understand a little about

the “losers” in such events. If we are not teaching about the Trail of Tears or Wounded Knee or The Burning Times in our studies of history, then we are exhibiting a harmful bias. The fact that actions have (often unintended) consequences is a key to understanding how the world works.

The following suggestions may be rejected out of hand by the dyed-in-the-wool historian. Historical fiction offer many opportunities to see the complexity of history in an entertaining context. Examples include *Huckleberry Finn* by Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), *The Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Fever 1793* by Laura Halse Anderson, *Gardens in the Dunes* by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae* by Stephen Pressfield. Looking even farther out, speculative historical fiction stretches the mind and helps us see that history was not inevitable or pat. For those willing to try it, I would recommend the first three books of the Alvin Maker series by Orson Scott Card, in which an alternative America is depicted from the days of the revolution forward.

Of course, confusion about truth value is the danger of using such materials in the classroom. By suggesting these unorthodox ways of approaching history, I am also highlighting the importance of historical methods as part of any history curriculum. What are the kinds and classes of evidence? What is a primary source? What forces are at work “behind the scenes”? What are the key points of view? How is historical fiction different from historical “fact”? How do we assess truth value? Why should I learn about history?

By incorporating primary materials like personal stories and oral histories, students of history can experience a greater sense of relationship with the materials and their authors. Through empathy and the engagement of point of view, personal relevance can also be enhanced. Despite our best efforts, the usefulness of history as informing the exercise of citizenship (strategy and outcomes) may not increase greatly without changes in other disciplines (e.g., journalism and political narratives). By admitting of a diversity of points of view while also reporting the known facts of history, its truth value is actually enhanced. Teens in particular perceive the examination of multiple points of view as more “fair” than their erasure.

At the end of the day, young citizens should be able to question pop-culture representations of history as well as journalistic reports. A quick review of how “war movies” have changed from the days of “With a Wing and a Prayer” to “Blackhawk Down” would provide an excellent lesson in this regard. It is the citizen (or student) who must judge the import and truth value of representations of history and decide whether and how to use it in work, personal beliefs or philosophy, and the exercise of citizenship.

Journalistic Narratives

Recently, the *Wall Street Journal* changed its look to incorporate more color, giving the stodgy old paper something of a pop-culture facelift. But I suspect that the authority or truth value of the paper has been undermined for its most loyal readers. The designs of such venerable papers as *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* have become emblematic of a certain truth value and journalistic standards. By contrast, *USA Today*, close to becoming the most widely read paper in the world, has always had a design style that borrowed from tabloids. Its “news” colorfully skims the top layer of “what’s going on.” It reports events, emotional

moments, and pop-cultural phenomena. *USA Today* is not deep. Rather than journalistic exploration, it provides the reader with a snapshot of the state of the world – one which is highly colored, not only by its style, but by its pro-American bias.

The *Jerusalem Post*, the *Jordan Times* or even the *London Times* are not on the average person's reading list, although all are readily available on the Web. Here again we come to the problem of objectivity vs. point of view. Just as a person does not perceive that he or she has an accent but thinks that others do, American journalism has its own invisible biases. *Everything has a point of view*. Reading newspapers like the *San Jose Mercury* or the *Chicago Tribune*, most U.S. citizens are fooled into thinking that an American point of view is unbiased and that most foreign newspapers, especially those of the Arabic world, are "propaganda." Whether and why may be true can only be learned by reading them. Through this exercise, we may identify the points of view embedded in our own news sources.

Television and radio news are problematic in somewhat different ways. As a recovering television addict (clean for 10 years, except for *Star Trek*), I rely on the radio for news. A friend has referred to my radio news habits as "NPR Poisoning." Yet of all news sources available to me, I find NPR (including their programs from the BBC) to be the broadest and boldest news sources in their diverse programming and treatment of point of view. Wishing not to be distracted by the spectacle, I choose radio as a more thought-provoking medium for news. During the 9/11 attack, I listened to the radio. I saw only one image of the World Trade Center bombing quite by accident in a hotel lobby. Later, I selected images from the Web to contemplate without the jabber of an excited reporter cluttering up my response.

A regular new source for me is "The News Hour" with Jim Lehrer, which is broadcast on public radio. Parenthetically, PBS seems unaware that many listen to the program on the radio, as their big sponsorship ads often do not speak the name of the sponsor. One night in a hotel room I decided to watch "The News Hour" on the television. I was appalled by the garish red-white-and-blue set and the overall visual design of the program. It was tacky. I don't think that "The News Hour" is tacky, but I do think that they are working in an arena where entertainment value is increasingly important. They must compete with the text-and-image extravaganzas of CNN and ABC. The recent flap over the potential replacement of Ted Koppel with David Letterman provides the best demonstration of the devaluation of news and the intrusion of entertainment into the journalistic sphere.

The ethics of journalism call for factual reportage and thoughtful analysis. Yet reporters are human beings, responding to the events they are covering. Typically, they withhold personal responses and judgments from their reportage. This is one of the ways in which NPR and other independent news sources are distinct from mainstream news. Reporters often include their personal experiences or responses, making it clear that it is a personal commentary.

The personal dimension is highly desirable; what we want from field reporters is a picture, not only of the events they are witnessing, but also something about the experience of being there, which includes personal response. Field journalists are heroes. They are sometimes killed in action. They go to dangerous places to help us find out what is going on "on the ground" and to give us context for understanding events. As we honor them and their experiences, so we also honor their profession.

Typical publishers concentrate primarily on sales and advertising revenue, so they are extremely concerned with strategy and outcomes in terms of business. Their relationship to journalists is typically less meaningful than their business concerns (although the occasional Pulitzer boosts business). Often, surrogate personal relevance is used as a sales tool, reporting stories of sensational crimes or emotionally charged political conflicts. The truth value of American journalism is currently being eroded by the move toward entertainment and the unspoken bias toward American policy.

The general public typically feels a weak relationship with journalists. Much of the news seems irrelevant to many people. The degradation of journalism by sensationalism and entertainment value tends to erode truth value and rarely provides the general public with actionable information. Children and teens tend to find the news to be part of an adult world that they are not ready to enter. Teens think about aspects of the news with a critical eye and often with an activist or utopian bias – characteristics that are extremely useful in shaping our future.

The lack of young voices in the news is one more way in which contemporary American journalism misses the mark. NPR has sponsored “Youth Radio,” a weekly news show that is entirely produced by young journalists. Sadly, there are few other sources of news from the world of the young. There is some activity of this sort on the Web – for example, www.kidnews.com (news created by young children around the world) and www.wiretap.com (teen-created news). Student newspapers can be a vibrant source of information about the interests and concerns of teens. The student paper at Los Gatos High School, for example, devoted two full pages to deep and thoughtful exploration of the causes and effects of the 9/11 attack. The paper delves into religion, popular culture, politics, and local news. School newspapers are great sources of information about how teens view the world and what is important to them. Teens may not read the *Times*, watch news on TV, or listen to news on the radio, but they are interested in news and they have a lot to say. By listening and creating more youth news outlets, we grow closer to our young citizens.

Political, Patriotic and Geopolitical Narratives

As the decline in our participation shows, Americans are displaying growing cynicism about the political process. The combination of campaign financing and negative campaigning support the jaundiced view that a citizen’s vote makes little difference. The debacle of the last presidential election lent credence to that opinion. Of the cynical Americans, young people have the lowest voter participation. Although they enjoy the spectacle of films and television, they are wise to the spectacle of politics. Interestingly, while youth voter participation is at an all-time low, volunteerism in the teen demographic is on the rise. This suggests that teens are indeed engaged in making the world a better place, but they don’t necessarily trust government to do it.

The 9/11 attacks brought on a wave of patriotism. Flags everywhere, patriotic bumper stickers, and tight-lipped news display the new patriotism. “United We Stand” is declared on cars, storefronts, and billboards. But there is something ominous about this phrase. The unspoken rejoinder is “Divided We Fall.” The hidden message is that a true patriot is

unquestioning during times of war. To question military policy or to attempt to articulate alternatives the solution strategies in play is unpatriotic and dangerous. But the lack of public discourse on policy runs completely counter to the spirit of the original United States. The backbone of a democratic republic is the freedom – even duty – to engage in discourse and disagreement. An amended slogan might be, “united we stand around; divided we might have a useful conversation.”

In my view, the narrative of patriotism has been over-generalized so that it interferes with the freedoms that our Constitution set out to guarantee. Certainly, patriotism is a good thing. Our judges and governmental officers and military personnel take an oath to “preserve and protect the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic.” Notice that this is not the same thing as agreeing to support “my country right or wrong.” Patriotism is, or should be, a commitment to be an active and responsible citizen, not a passive supporter of the political flavor of the day.

The Civil Rights movement, for example, was intensely patriotic, as it drew its strength from a Constitutional principle. Institutionalized racial discrimination grossly undermines the spirit of the American democratic republic. Yet in the 60s, Civil Rights workers were labeled as “unpatriotic” and were pushed around by those who believed that the status quo was equivalent to the “right way” to do things. One of the remarkable strengths of the Constitution is its humanistic spirit. The founders foresaw a country that would undergo much growth and change. The Constitution was a guide for accomplishing change in a democratic way. It detailed both the rights and the responsibilities of citizens. It even set up ways for citizens to amend it. In our day, the responsibilities of citizenship are in danger of fading from consciousness.

A good patriotic narrative makes citizenship its centerpiece. If we have a corrupt campaign financing process, only active voters can change it. If we have low voter turnout, only citizens can change it. If we have domestic or global policies that deprive people of the rights that our Constitution proclaims as belonging to every person, only active participants in our democratic republic can change them. If political spectacle and sloganism displace meaningful discourse, only the people can change it. We need patriotic narratives that can revitalize citizenship. Such narratives may also be understood as actionable narratives. In the realm of citizenship, the actions to be promoted are engaging in discourse, becoming well-informed, communicating with your representatives, voting, and exercising the right to peacefully assemble.

Other actionable narratives that are much needed in our day would help people understand what actions they can take to improve their world. These include activism, volunteer opportunities, ways to become involved in their children’s educations, honesty-based techniques for persuading others, and ways to advance unpopular causes without falling into the trap of self-marginalization. The narrative of education, for example, revolves around explanation of the status quo. “This is history. This is science. This is mathematics.” To transform this view of education into an actionable narrative, a 180° turn is needed: the focus must be shifted from what is known to what is to be discovered, and what can be done with present and future knowledge. Life is change. The best education helps a student to survive, manage, and direct change.

Finally, we come to the category of geopolitical narratives. These are the “grand narratives” that percolate through all our stories and actions. Among the most damaging, in my view, is the narrative that links business and economic growth to prosperity. We demand “growth” from our economy and our business institutions every year. Futurist and writer Paul Hawken sees growth in a different light – instead of prosperity for the whole citizenry, he believes, growth typically transforms natural capital into wealth for the usual suspects – a wealthy elite [14]. If a steady stream of disastrous oil spills or clear-cutting the Pacific Northwest is required for growth, then the narrative of business, economic growth, and prosperity wins.

This narrative is challenged from several directions – by those who see the wisdom of sustainability, by those who prefer harmony to growth at the expense of the environment, by those whose cultures and livelihoods are displaced by “growth.” Hawken observes that we have lots of people and not enough work, and that it therefore might be better to de-industrialize some economies. Contrariwise, the invention of the triode by Lee de Forest created new wealth without consuming natural capital; therefore, knowledge may create new economies and new wealth. How that wealth becomes general prosperity remains problematic.

People sometimes invoke the building of the railroads or the industrial revolution as examples of enterprise making life better for everyone. But today, we are much closer to the edge of environmental collapse. Different criteria should be applied. Overfishing, excessive logging and unsound logging practices, overpopulation, air pollution, water shortages, industrial and nuclear waste, and global warming are all parts of the picture. Even when faced with compelling scientific evidence, the business world would like to call “global warming” an “hypothesis” until the very last minute. The truth is that the very last minute may have already arrived. A global narrative is coalescing around the idea that husbandry of the Earth so that it remains a good home for humanity is more important than growth and development.

At the same time, we have much to teach the rest of the world, if we can do so with respect and follow-through. “Cultural imperialism” is anathema to the left, while cultural relativism is in vogue. Some people worry about the corrosive effects of American media (and American economic development) on the cultures of other peoples, but Hollywood earns most of its dollars from international distribution of American films, and so these concerns are typically overridden by the narrative of business and prosperity. Our solution to governmental and cultural practices in other countries with which we disagree is to ignore them unless they have economic implications for America. From female excision to the state-supported incursion of processed foods into the agricultural culture of India, we turn a blind eye to those problems that don’t apparently damage our prosperity.

But if we think of ourselves as humans living together on a single planet, a different narrative comes to light. The alternative looks a lot like cultural imperialism. It involves exporting the form of the democratic republic to other countries and, increasingly, working with the United Nations to deal with global issues. The form of the democratic republic slots into tribal cultures particularly well, and is most certainly preferable to military governments or dictatorships in terms of public well-being and prospects for peace. Critics of this view say, we tried exporting the democratic republic to Russia and it failed. The typical explanation is

that the Russian people have no experience with democracy and are inclined culturally to prefer other forms of government.

Yet if we believe that the form of the democratic republic is the best way to guarantee freedom and participation for citizens, then we are obligated to try to export it, as we did to Japan and Germany. The difference between the Russian experience and the narrative of democracy is *follow-through*. Teaching, learning, and aid make the difference between a half-hearted declaration that ours is the best way and a full-up conversion of less satisfactory forms of government to the ideal of a democratic republic. And when we have accomplished that, we may find that we are all global citizens, and that the freedoms inherent in the definition of democracy are adequate to accommodate – and even to celebrate - cultural differences.

At the end of the day, I believe that the best geopolitical narrative is one that honors individuals, cultures, the idea of the democratic republic, and – most of all – sustaining and protecting the Earth. Our government backed out of the Kyoto protocols. They backed out of support for various UN health initiatives. They opted for policies that support the old game of nationalism, growth, and exploitation. They are sneaking around the Constitution to surreptitiously weaken the separation of church and state. They routinely privilege business over the health of the planet and the rights of other human beings to determine their own livelihoods. To construct a new story, I think we need to give our narrative intelligence the strongest possible workout. We need to absorb many other kinds of narratives and understand the kinds of truths they have for us. May our next geopolitical narrative be devoted to establishing freedom, harmony, balance, and sustainability. If we can construct the story, we can find a way to make it so.