

WHY STORIES ARE POWERFUL SPURS TO POLITICAL ACTION

by Frederick W. Mayer, Duke University

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped to the microphone on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Before him, more than 200,000 people awaited his words – and millions more would hear them that evening on television. In that moment, the greatest opportunity he had ever had to make his case, to persuade the undecided, to mobilize his supporters, King spoke in what might seem a surprising way: He did not offer a litany of statistics, did not argue a legal case, did not weigh the costs and benefits of alternative policies. He told a story.

King's story that dramatic day began as tragedy, with America failing to make good on its promise of equality and justice for all; but then, just as his audience was facing the despair of the moment, he lifted it by invoking hopes "deeply rooted in the American dream," a triumphant redemption in which "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."

Two Puzzles about Narratives in Politics

My new book, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*, explores two puzzles. The first has long preoccupied social scientists: How do individuals come together to act collectively? Why vote, why contribute, why join, why march, why protest when logic suggests free riding on the actions of others? The second puzzle has long been ignored by academics: Why is it that those who promote collective action so often turn to stories? Why is it that when activists call for action, candidates solicit votes, organizers seek new members, or generals rally their troops, there is so much story-telling?

A crucial part of the answer to both puzzles, I argue, lies in the power of story. It is no accident that stories are so often involved in group mobilization. Shared stories are humanity's essential tool for overcoming the obstacles to collective action, because they help people forge common interests in a collective goal and surmount the temptations individuals may have to "free ride" by letting others do the shared work to win an important benefit. Stories can inspire cooperation and assure that everyone will pitch in. Indeed, there is compelling reason to believe that human beings' predilection for deploying socially meaningful narratives is an evolutionary adaptation that has given our species a competitive advantage.

The Storytelling Animal

Evidence from many disciplines shows that human beings are animals given to telling, consuming, and enacting stories. As the poet and literary scholar Barbara Hardy once eloquently put it, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative." So immersed are humans in stories that, like the air we breathe, it is hard to recognize their importance. We use stories to make sense of our experiences and imbue them with meaning, to define our identity and establish our core values, and to motivate and script our actions.

What is more, because people are so constituted by the stories they tell themselves, they can also be moved by stories told to them by other people. The “call of stories,” in the words of psychologist Robert Coles, is well known to participants in the persuasion business. To shape beliefs about a problem and establish an interest in addressing it, leaders tell stories. How could we come to have an “interest” in relief for earthquake victims, or in fighting terrorism, or in solving climate change, except by way of the stories through which we experience such things?

Not all stories are equally captivating, to be sure. Stories that justify people’s self-interest or reaffirm their prior beliefs are much more likely to be welcomed, and people are perfectly capable of putting fingers in their ears if they distrust the storyteller or wish to avoid an inconvenient message. It might seem, therefore, that the only stories that could “work” to inspire and mobilize groups are stories that align with prior beliefs and interests – that stories therefore have no independent force. But that is not the case. Persuasive storytellers draw on familiar themes to create new narratives, to tell stories that resonate with the religious, historical and ideological narratives their listeners already have in mind. The genius of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech lay in making the civil rights story an essential part of the American story – indeed, also a part of the Biblical story of Exodus.

The Ingredients of Stories that Mobilize Collective Action

Even if shared stories establish collective memory and identity and resonate with common beliefs and interests, that is not enough to inspire group action. Unless there is some satisfaction in joining, in participating, in acting itself, listeners may be tempted to let others do the work. That is why leaders who call a community to action not only use story to construct common interests in outcomes, they seek to dramatize the moment so that, as King put it, listeners are pulled onto the stage of history, becoming people whose choices will determine whether the collective drama will end in triumph or tragedy. Listeners gain a sense of suspense about whether they themselves will become heroes or villains in the unfolding story.

Effective narrative-wielding leaders, in short, align autobiography with history, making participation in the collective drama a defining moment in each person’s personal narrative. Powerful story wielders compel each individual to confront the question, “What did you do when history called?” They make participation in collective action the dramatic imperative, a fundamental test of character, a necessary expression of identity.

Lessons for Policymakers and Leaders

The centrality of narrative in politics has action implications for democratic leaders:

- Tell a story! Facts are great, analysis is important, but if the goal is political mobilization, a shared story is essential. And remember, you cannot beat a story without another story. Politics often revolves around a contest of stories.
- Skill in telling matters. There is an art to political storytelling, following the conventions of plot and character and the cultural themes your audience will understand.
- Like all powerful tools, stories can be misused. Leaders have an obligation to tell stories that convey truth. All stories are fictions, yet some fictions are essentially true.

Read more in Frederick W. Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action* (Oxford University Press, 2014).