

SLAYING
THE
GORGON

THE RISE OF THE
STORYTELLING
INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

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INTRODUCTION

The Wave That Eats People

ON A SMALL ISLAND OFF THE COAST of Thailand there lives a community of fisher people known as the Morgan Sea Gypsies. Since time out of mind they have gathered around their campfires at night to tell the story of the Laboon, the great wave that eats people. So fierce is the Laboon, in fact, that the other waves are afraid of it and run away before it arrives. Thus the story counsels the people to seek the safety of higher ground whenever the waves flee because it means the angry Laboon is on its way.

And this is exactly what the Sea Gypsies did just before the 2004 tsunami struck their remote island. Tragically, on far too many other Indonesian and Thai beaches, people ventured out onto the sand exposed by the receding waves to take photographs or pick up stranded fish and were killed when the great wave washed ashore.

But not the Sea Gypsies. All one hundred and eighty-one men, women, and children on Surin Island survived because they fled to a temple high up in the mountains, heeding the story of the Laboon, a legend that had been faithfully passed down from generation to generation.

* * *

I begin with the story of the Morgan Sea Gypsies because storytelling in its most basic form is about survival. It is about our physical and psychological survival, a way of making sense of the world. We use stories to pass on what we've learned, to lift and strengthen our spirits, and to remind ourselves of the common origin of all humankind.

But we can also use stories for mischief, to confuse and deceive, to turn one group of people against another, and to sap the joy and hope out of life. Thus there is both promise and peril in this uniquely human activity; storytellers can serve us, but they can also harm us.

By exploring the art and practice of storytelling in the modern world and its relationship to the human mind, this book provides a framework for understanding the significant changes taking place in the realms of politics, religion, public education, and culture.

- What causes the political gridlock that prevents us from solving the problems that threaten our very survival?
- Why are movie actors, professional wrestlers, and comedians becoming governors and United States senators?
- Why is the judge of a reality television show paid two hundred times more than a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court?
- Why does public education's reliance on standardized testing cause some school officials and teachers to falsify test scores?
- Why are churches holding worship services in movie theaters?

- How did a spat over a microphone in 1980 change the course of world history?
- And last, what is a “sustainable imagination,” and what happens when a society industrializes the way it tells its stories?

These are some of the questions we wrestle with and it can feel as if a tsunami of discontent and ill will is sweeping over us, a Laboon that will devour all that we hold dear.

For the past thirty-five years I have made my living as a traditional storyteller. I’ve spun yarns at festivals and colleges, museums and libraries, on television and by the light of a crackling campfire on the riverbank after a day of whitewater rafting. I’ve even told ghost stories deep inside a coal mine on Halloween. It’s been a traveler’s life with its share of uncertainty but also moments of wonder and a wealth of opportunities to make friends. I particularly enjoy telling stories to young people. I tell them how Jack climbed a mountain to defeat the ugly old giant and save the king’s daughter or how a wizard turned an old woman into a woodpecker because she was too nosy. Then again I might tell them how Davy Crockett could grin the bark off a tree or why some snakes have rattles at the end of their tails.

Lately, however, I have been telling a different kind of story: a story for adults. And like those I tell children, it is a tale filled with giants and ogres, evil spellcasters and snaked-haired monsters, magical wands and enchanted mirrors. Only I’m not telling about “once upon a time in a land far away” but about what is happening in our own world today. Let me explain.

In the early 1990s, my wife Paula and I were experimenting with ways to enliven the learning experience for young people in

the classroom. One approach was to have students perform radio plays, which led the California Department of Education to ask us to design a tobacco-use prevention curriculum for elementary schools that would include a recording of a professionally performed radio play, information on the history and health impacts of tobacco use, and a do-it-yourself radio drama script with instructions on how to make the necessary sound effects. It took us a number of months to complete the project, and, during that time, I researched how tobacco companies marketed their products to young people. Not only did I find that some of the companies employed cartoon characters like Joe Camel to grab the attention of young consumers, but they also paid large sums of money to film studios to include pro-tobacco messages in major films. The Disney Corporation's 1989 film *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, for instance, included a scene designed to convince the viewer that tobacco wasn't addictive, but that someone, in this case the caring, worried father of the lead teenage male heartthrob, only smoked when he was worried, giving the impression that a person could *choose* to smoke or not whenever he wanted. Other films at the time with pro-tobacco messages included *Lethal Weapon* and *Superman II*.

It's fair to say that analyzing tobacco ads, reading tobacco company internal memos, and watching tobacco-friendly feature films politicized my thinking about the role of storytelling and media in our lives. Soon afterward, I began working with troubled youths in juvenile detention facilities and treatment centers. The more I worked with these young people, the more I saw how mass media shaped their view of the world and influenced their often destructive behaviors. Blatant cynicism, gratuitous violence, and degrading sexual attitudes were increasingly the norm and not the exception in youth entertainment. The intention of these stories as I saw it was not to pass on wisdom, like the tale of the Laboon, but rather to

shock, offend, confound, and in many cases bring about, as the director Wes Craven states while playing himself in one of his own films, “the death of innocence.”

All this made me both sad and angry because I was raising my own children and did not want them exposed to these dehumanizing influences. But if so many kids loved going to these movies, watching these television shows, and playing these video games, and if their parents didn’t seem to mind, who was I to complain or raise a rumpus? I wasn’t a politician, a child psychologist, or a professional media critic. No one elected me the nation’s culture tsar. Quite the opposite. I was wary of those who only too eagerly set themselves up as the Morality Police. Nor was I a supporter of artistic censorship.

But I began to see that as a working storyteller, I might have a responsibility to speak out in the same way a surgeon would if he discovered that the scalpels were improperly sterilized in the OR, or an architect who, while visiting a building site, notices the contractor has substituted substandard materials for those called for in the plans. Even if the building isn’t one of his own, he still has an ethical responsibility to raise the alarm because he *knows* the building is unsafe and could collapse. Well, my expertise was storytelling and I believed I saw things in the way stories were structured and told that were hidden from most non-storytellers. When the man behind the curtain, in other words, turned a wheel or pushed a lever, I knew what the wheel and lever actually *did*. So as the months slipped by, I became increasingly burdened by this question of my responsibility.

Then one day I was asked to give a keynote address at a national conference for juvenile court judges. Lacking what I considered the necessary academic or celebrity credentials, I was at first intimidated by the request until the conference organizer, a lovely man named Jim Toner, convinced me that the judges genuinely wanted to hear my views regarding the

impact of the entertainment industry on young people. Thus inspired, I created a presentation titled *Cinderella Meets Freddy Krueger: Storytelling in Modern America* that combined projected still images, segments of recorded audio, and several clips from popular feature films. I compared a traditional ghost story—in most versions of the Cinderella story, it is the ghost of the mother, not a fairy godmother, who returns to aid her ill-used daughter—with the new breed of ghost/demon stories coming out of Hollywood. I hoped to show how the structure of narrative itself was being radically altered from one celebrating the victory of good over evil and a universe responsive to our actions, into one in which people are adrift in a chaotic and meaningless universe, where a person's fate is determined not by his moral or ethical behavior or acts of kindness but by chance, a mere toss of the dice. Walk in the wrong door at the wrong time and you risk being slashed to pieces by a knife-wielding maniac. End of story.

But whether the universe is ordered and beneficent or random and cruel was not the question I wanted to put before the judges. After all, that is a matter of opinion. Instead, I wanted to explore why our primary organs of storytelling—companies like Viacom, Miramax, FOX, Time-Warner—were giving up on the traditional structure of narrative, one that has come down to us from earlier times when, ironically, life must have seemed a great deal more random and cruel than it does for suburban kids today.

So the day of the conference arrived and I gave my keynote. Afterward, a number of the judges told me that my use of folklore motifs and personal anecdotes in particular had helped clarify many of the troubling attitudes and behaviors they confronted in their courtrooms every day. I was asked to speak at other juvenile justice conferences but I sensed that I was missing something, something important. I therefore

decided to interview other working storytellers: filmmakers, visual effects artists, talk show hosts, preachers, courtroom attorneys, playwrights, poets, journalists—anyone who could help me better understand what was going on. One storyteller recommended the book *Understanding Media, the Extensions of Man* by the noted Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan. As I read McLuhan, I was captivated by his theory that the *medium* of storytelling does more to shape people's beliefs and behaviors than the *content* of the stories. Hitherto, I had focused on the influence of content and the sophisticated corporate money machines that decide which particular content gets foisted on our young people through the “mainstream” media. I began to investigate the electronic mediums of storytelling, and, as I did so, I saw how the impact of these new mediums spread far beyond the precincts of youth entertainment, reaching into nearly every aspect of our personal and collective lives. Other authors whose works contributed to my understanding of this phenomena included Neil Postman, Leonard Shlain, Walter Ong, and the historian Karen Armstrong.

In time, I changed the name of my presentation to *Slaying the Gorgon: the Rise of the Storytelling Industrial Complex*, because I saw in the myth of Perseus and Medusa a unique way of understanding how storytelling mediums influence society.

As a child, the first thing I did when my copy of *Highlights* magazine arrived in the mail was turn to the hidden pictures page where I would eagerly search for the spoon in the branches of a tree, the garden hoe in the picket fence, and the face of an old man in the clouds. This, I think, is the best way to grapple with the hurly-burly of modern media. We begin seeing only what is on the surface: a four-star general is fired because of an unguarded remark made to a reporter from a rock music magazine, a candidate accepts his party's nomination for president inside a football stadium, a movie star protests the

government's foreign policy by getting arrested, a preacher is elected governor and then given his own television talk show, and a poster artist convinces people to occupy a city park. But if we are patient and sufficiently inquisitive, we begin to see the hidden pictures beneath the activity and apparent confusion. We see the recurring patterns, the power deals between warlords and mythmakers, the age-old conflict between what I call *mythos* knowing and *logos* knowing. All the same, I think we should avoid trying to be too up-to-the-minute in our observations. Instead, I recommend that we take advantage of the distance of time for it is easier to map the shape of a coastline or an approaching hurricane through the lens of a camera on an orbiting satellite rather than by standing on the shore where vision is obstructed by sand dunes, boardwalks, and summer cottages. That's how I found those hidden objects in my Highlights magazine, not by bringing the page up close to my nose but by holding it out at arm's length and squinting.

And as for the current popularity of social networking mediums such as Facebook and Twitter, I know there are people who claim these mediums are turning human storytelling on its head. In the long term, they may be right although I have my doubts—we've been at this storytelling business since we huddled together in caves and micro bursts of text or the corraling of snippets of personal information with a photograph or two, even a short video, does not necessarily a story or storyteller make. Therefore, I will leave this topic, along with the latest political upset and celebrity scandal, for other culture watchers to ponder in the hope that the frameworks and ideas presented in this book will suffice in providing the reader with a foundational understanding of how we seek to communicate the essential truths of life with each other and with those who will come after us.

* * *

I conclude this introduction the same way I started, with a story. Some years ago Paula and I directed a summer camping program for young people called *Camp ImaginAction*, a week-long language-arts camp held in the High Sierra of northern California. Each night we gathered around a campfire and told stories and sang songs, after which the counselors would lead their young charges back to their tents in the dark to read them stories from American literature, the soft glow of their flashlights shimmering like fairy orbs upon the canvas of each tent. And the fun continued the next day as the campers participated in activities inspired by the late-night stories. They built *Huckleberry Finn* rafts and learned how to work with sled dogs like the mushers in Jack London's novel *Call of the Wild*.

Even the start of camp was designed to impress upon the campers the fact that for the next six days and nights they were going to be active participants in the telling of stories, no longer passive consumers. That's why a few days before driving up to the camp we stopped by the local Salvation Army store and picked up a rather large console TV, the kind I grew up with in the 1960s.

Shortly after the campers arrived, we loaded the television onto a sled-style gurney, draped it with flowers, and in the manner of a funeral procession, marched everyone through the ponderosa pine forest to where we had dug a grave. Three of our number were counselors who, dressed in black, sniffled into their handkerchiefs remembering what a good and loyal companion the television had been while I assured the campers that we weren't burying every television set, just this one because it had died from overuse.

When we reached the gravesite I cut the power cord and handed it to one of the bereaved counselors as another played

taps on the camp bugle. While we had to struggle to keep from laughing the campers were as serious as drenched cats. Why had the television died? they asked a second and third time.

Because it wore out, I told them.

They asked if we'd come back later and dig it up and get it fixed.

No, I said. We would let it rest in peace. And for the rest of the week we would live and tell our own stories.

The campers were quiet as we lowered the television into the ground and they lined up single file so each could throw a handful of dirt on top of it. When everyone had had their turn, three other counselors and I began shoveling the displaced dirt back into the hole. I hadn't, however, realized how long this would take. So after a few awkward minutes during which the campers stood around with nothing to do, I asked Paula to take everyone to the fire pit for the first evening campfire.

One young boy of ten or eleven, however, asked if he might stay behind and help bury the television. I chalked this up to an attraction to shovels and dirt and men working together and I said "Sure" and handed him a shovel. To be honest, with seventy-five campers to entertain, feed, and see off safely to bed, I paid the boy scant attention until I noticed that he was shoveling as though his life depended on it and muttering to himself, not unlike a Tibetan monk chanting his mantra. As I inched closer to make out what he was saying, this was what I heard with each scoop of dirt that fell on top of the television:

"Now my brother will play with me. Now my brother will play with me. Now my brother will play with me."

It is to that boy that I dedicate this book.