

“Why Storytellers Lie”

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The Atlantic

5 April 2012

In a new book out next week, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, author Jonathan Gottschall discusses why we humans have such a strong interest in stories, and argues that we're all storytellers—and all liars too, even if most of us don't realize it, even if most of us are lying primarily to ourselves.

As way of getting into the question of why we're so likely to bend the truth (and so clueless about doing it), let's first talk about why stories are so important to us. "Some thinkers, following Darwin, argue that the evolutionary source of story is sexual selection, not natural selection," Gottschall writes. "Maybe stories...aren't just obsessed with sex; maybe they are ways of getting sex by making gaudy, peacock like displays of our skill, intelligence, and creativity—the quality of our minds." It's true that it sure doesn't hurt, attraction-wise, when someone can spin a great yarn. Just think of that great fictional storyteller Aeneas, who won over Queen Dido in large part because he did such a good job of enthralling her with his talk of the Trojan War. (Even back then, apparently, people spoke of Trojans prior to sex.)

Stories are useful for so much more than just helping us get lucky, however, as Gottschall points out. For listeners (and readers), stories instruct. From Aesop's fables to essays in women's magazines, they encourage us to think about what happens to people (or anthropomorphized animals) who, say, behave more like hares than tortoises or have a threesome with their best friend and her husband. Stories socialize. By demonstrating the intricacies of human relationships, novels and memoirs encourage us to rehearse what we would do and say in a variety of situations—platonic, familial, and maybe especially romantic. Stories—particularly fictional ones—moralize. They help us figure out our values and whet our need for justice.

When we tell stories about ourselves, they also serve another important (arguably higher) function: They help us to believe our lives are meaningful. "The storytelling mind"—the human mind, in other words—"is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence," Gottschall writes. It doesn't like to believe life is accidental; it wants to believe everything happens for a reason. Stories allow us to impose order on the chaos.

And we all concoct stories, Gotschall notes—even those of us who have never commanded the attention of a room full of people while telling a wild tale. "[S]ocial psychologists point out that when we meet a friend, our conversation mostly consists of an exchange of gossipy stories," he writes. "And every night, we reconvene with our loved ones ... to share the small comedies and tragedies of our day."

What's more, in private, we're constantly working on far more serious story projects: memoirs that (for most of us) will never be published, or even written down.

Every day of our lives—sometimes with help working things out via tweets or Facebook status updates—we fine-tune the grand narratives of our lives; the stories of who we are, and how we came to be. Those identity tales are usually significantly fabricated, according to Gotschall, no matter how much we might think of ourselves as people who always tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. "Scientists have discovered that the memories we use to form our own life stories are boldly fictionalized," he notes. We might, for instance, tell ourselves we had more power over a break-up than we really did, because it's more pleasant to believe that than to face the messier reality that the other person was as much an agent of the split as we were. Or we might convince ourselves that getting fired was what we subconsciously really wanted; how else would we have found time to write that screenplay we've been thinking about for years?

That's not to say we intentionally or consciously falsify our autobiographies. Telling stories—even to ourselves—is always a matter of playing telephone, as psychologist Nate Kornell noted in [a recent *Psychology Today* piece](#) about the now-infamous performer Mike Daisey (who fabricated parts of a supposedly true story about Apple's questionable business practices in China). "The second time I tell a story, what I'm remembering is the first time I told the story," Kornell writes. "And the 201st time, I'm really remembering the 200th time. Many of our memories are records of our own stories, not of events that actually took place."

The more often we tell a narrative, in other words, the more it changes subtly with each telling—and because we tell ourselves the stories of our own lives over and over and over again, they can change a lot. (Think of all the times you've explained—to yourself or others—how your parents and siblings shaped you, or why you chose to attend that college, or how a teacher or mentor helped you discover your calling.) As Gotschall puts it, "We spend our lives crafting stories that make us the noble—if flawed—protagonists of first-person dramas. ... A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative ... replete with strategic forgetting

and skillfully spun meanings." For this reason, he asserts, all memoirs, no matter how much their authors believe them to be true, should come with a disclaimer: "*Based on a true story.*"

I asked Kornell what implications these ideas have for psychotherapy—a treatment that encourages us to repeat our formative stories *ad nauseum*. Doesn't it, then, help us to *misremember* our lives, rather than uncover truths about them? He acknowledged that yes, this can happen, as it did during the rash of 1990's childhood sex abuse scandals that revolved largely around "recovered" memories—those that had been supposedly forgotten or repressed for a long time, often many years. "Researchers have found that evidence corroborating abuse is conspicuously absent in one category: People who 'recovered' memories in therapy," Kornell notes. "Corroboration is much easier to find for people who recover memories outside of therapy, suggesting that therapy did implant many false memories."

Sinister as that may sound, therapy likely helps many of us feel better at least in part *because* it encourages us to become less truthful autobiographers. As studies have shown, depressives tend to have more realistic—and less inflated—perceptions of their importance, abilities, and power in the world than others. So those of us who benefit from therapy may like it in large part because it helps us to do what others can do more naturally: to see ourselves as heroes; to write (and re-write) the stories of our lives in ways that cast us in the best possible light; to believe that we have grown from helpless orphans or outcasts to warriors in control of our fate.

And there isn't necessarily any harm in our little fictions, as long as the main audience is ourselves. After all, most of us are not selling our stories to journalistic enterprises, like *This American Life*, or to theaters full of people expecting to hear a true tale, the way Mike Daisey was. (Indeed, many opt for straight-up fictionalization, preferring MFA programs to therapy.)

All the same, maybe the next time we rush to condemn a Mike Daisey, we should remember how much we all have a tendency to fictionalize, whether we realize it or not. We like stories because, as Gotschall puts it, we are "addicted to meaning"—and meaning is not always the same as the truth.