

Weathering Tough Times: Choosing the Stories We Receive

This week, there was an inauguration for the 47th President of the United States—who was also the 45th President. His return signals different things for different people. Regardless of political ideology, it's true that this man elicits very strong emotions in most people here in the US, and even across the globe.

Right now, I invite you to check in with yourself: what emotions come up for you when you think about this inauguration or the last US Presidential Election? A reminder ... to breathe.

Now, I invite you to reflect on how you engaged with the election or the inauguration. Did you read coverage in a newspaper? In print or online? Did you see photographs and images shared through social media? Did you listen to the radio? Did you watch any 24-hour news networks? Do you subscribe to newsletters that appear in your email inbox? Did you watch short clips through YouTube? Maybe you caught some headlines or clips while watching late night comedians or daytime talk shows or listening to political podcasts?

I'm asking these questions because I would like this week to reflect together on the ways in which our civic discourse and engagement is impacted not only by the Stories we receive but the methods through which we receive them.

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This month, we have been exploring the theme: Story. We began, with the first Sunday of the year, with a reflection on our personal stories and made some choices about what we wanted to let go of from the past while setting the course for the narrative of the year yet to come.

Then, Gillian led us through an exploration of the importance of myth in our everyday lives, drawing on Joseph Campbell's analysis of the four functions of myth. And Kay Wallick led us last week through a reflection of the history of Racial Justice in our country. She beautifully laid out the cultural context for some of her personal stories and experiences in working toward a more just society for people of all backgrounds.

It has been a month rich with discussion and thought. Thank you, Kay, for inviting me to take part in it.

I have really been thinking lately about two things—both the many ways that Story is woven into my daily life and also that we are entering challenging times politically in this country. So, the question I want to explore today is, how do we persist in challenging times, particularly in a world oversaturated with stories that often conflict, mislead, and strike fear into our hearts?

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When I began the process of thinking about the importance of Story, as a theme, in my life, I started outlining the ways it shows up in my work.

When I was in college, I became passionate about the mythology of the American West and the ways in which old stories of how the western landscape has been explored, settled, stolen, ranched, conserved—impact the cultural identity of people who live in places like Wyoming. I even wrote a couple of plays about it.

After college, I chased a particular interest I had in Documentary theater - a genre that takes the transcripts of interviews with real people and weaves them together into a staged reenactment of lived experiences and historical accounts. I love the tension this creates between the realities of an original, live conversation with a person and the heightened emotions that populate the world of theater. An iterative process, which necessitates the layering up of personas, realities, stories, can teach us things about truths buried beneath the surface—the way an echo can amplify a small sound. By the same token, this repetition can take us in the opposite direction—it can obfuscate and manipulate the audience, almost like the use of smoke and mirrors.

Today, I am fortunate in that I get to go to work every day at the WYO Theater and figure out ways to reach people of all ages through theater education—something that revolves around stories of all kinds, found in folk tales, scripts, musicals, etc.

As you can tell, Theater has been my most preferred medium for sharing, experiencing, and exploring stories.

But when it comes to staying informed on the news of the world, the stories that I receive are heavily mediated and mostly arrive via one of my trusty technological devices—sometimes my laptop computer or my television, but more often than not my smart phone!

This is where I want us to focus today—the medium or media through which we absorb stories of the happenings in our world. Some may be familiar with Marshall McLuhan’s assertion that the Medium is the Message. This aphorism implies that the form of communication is just as important as, and significantly impacts, the message and the way it is perceived and understood.

I have been spending some time over the last couple months with a book by Neil Postman called “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.”

Postman wrote this book about the perils of a world where people seek out entertainment above all else. At the time when he was writing, the television was the dominant conveyor of mediated stories. He warned that the development of television and its impact on culture and society by 1985 had begun to reveal that we were becoming broadly more trivial and less informed.

Postman wrote:

“This idea—that there is a content called ‘news of the day’—was entirely created by the telegraph (and since amplified by newer media), which made it possible to move contextualized information over vast spaces at incredible speed. The news of the day is a figment of our technological imagination. It is, quite precisely, a media event. ...Without a medium to create its form, the news of the day does not exist” (8).

“Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (4).

“Of course, to say that television is entertaining is merely banal. ...But what I am claiming [in this book] is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. Our television set keeps us in constant communion with the world, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable.

The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is represented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.

“To say it still another way: Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure. That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to ‘join them tomorrow.’ What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters’ invitation because we know that the ‘news’ is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say.... A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis” (87).

Postman goes on:

“Let us consider the case of Iran during the drama that was called the ‘Iranian Hostage Crisis.’ ... Everyone had an opinion about this event, for in America everyone is entitled to an opinion, and it is certainly useful to have a few when a pollster shows up. But these are opinions of a quite different order from eighteenth- or nineteenth-century opinions. It is probably more accurate to call them emotions rather than opinions, which would account for the fact that they change from week to week, as the pollsters tell us. What is happening here is that television is altering the meaning of ‘being informed’ by creating a species of information that might properly be called *disinformation*. I am using this word almost in the precise sense in which it is used by spies in the CIA or KGB. Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information—misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information—information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that television news deliberately aims to deprive Americans of a coherent, contextual understanding of their world. I mean to say that when news is packaged as entertainment, that is the inevitable result. And in saying that the television news show entertains but does not inform, I am saying something far more serious than that we are being deprived of authentic information. I am saying we are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed. Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge?” (107-108).

So, if we understand that the method of receiving information is as important as the information itself, then I ask us to consider social media. We consider social media to be a space in which we can keep up with the people that we know “in real life.” But we know more now (than in the early days of platforms like Facebook) that there are algorithms that dictate what we see and when.

Whole swaths of people have been radicalized online because one video explaining a conspiracy theory simply leads to another and another: “If you liked that kind of content, then we have more for you to click on.” Ultimately, social media platforms must find ways to keep you engaging with their sites, so your attention has become the commodity.

How do you keep a person’s attention? Usually by playing on their emotions. So, whether it is Facebook, Youtube, or MSNBC, the media companies are continually innovating to find ways to make you *feel* strongly—whichever way that might be. In this way, media companies are not so different from online scammers. Whether you wanted to find out more about the heartwarming story of a 10 year old speaking encouraging words into neighbors' Ring cameras or if you were horrified by the child missing from your area—a click is a click.

On the internet, stories are currency—content is king. There is a constant churning out of new videos, photos, articles, and when something goes “viral”—the most enticing videos and photos are shared and reshared, taking up space in our individual and collective minds.

But we might feel like we know all of this already. When I was growing up, I surely understood that “TV rots your brain.” Today, plenty of people share the opinion that our smartphones are not only ruining our posture but also our ability to relate to one another face-to-face.

But as we face a repeat of a Presidency that will likely draw its power from the fear and anxiety of both the people who support the current president and the people who oppose him—I am hopeful we can, as a people, find a new way to respond.

What does it mean to separate the emotion from our opinion of him? Can I judge his values, policies and actions without giving him my fury? Does it feel in some way like the opposite of rage or sorrow is apathy?

Maybe it isn't. Maybe we have been trained by the media we engage with to believe that to have an opinion is to have a strong emotion—or that to have a strong emotion is to have an informed opinion.

Often our opinions are fueled by strong emotions like fear, rage, indignation, as they are expressions of our values and beliefs. But these emotions can be used against us. We are vulnerable in these states of heightened negative emotions; we are easier to manipulate. Think of an angry mob with pitchforks.

But we also know that we can be motivated by strong positive emotions like joy, inspiration, and hope. This makes me think about another important emotion: Love.

Last week, Kay shared the MLK quote, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

In the moment Kay shared this quote, I was struck by the idea of love in this context. I asked myself, Wait—is love really an emotion? I have come to understand love as an action, a commitment to care. Dr. King’s assertion that love and power must be wielded together supports this idea.

The stories we engage with through entertainment manipulate our emotions with colorful, moving images and carefully curated talking-heads.

So, maybe love is not an emotion in this way because we must choose—not to *feel* love—but to enact it. If we endeavor to separate our emotions from our opinions, that does not mean turning away from love.

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Notably, Postman’s book was published in 1985.

His Foreword reads:

“We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn’t, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

“But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another—slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to **love** their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one... Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. ... As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny ‘failed to take into account man’s most infinite appetite for distractions.’ In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we **love** will ruin us. (Foreword)”

This section of writing had a great impact on me. No doubt, in part, because of the repeated use of the word “fear.” As a discussion of dystopian visions for our future, it had me shaking in my boots. But, interestingly enough, this is what the most effective mediated stories are designed to do to us—make us very afraid!

I think there is something useful in this outline—the part about the difference between externally imposed oppression and oppression that is welcomed in. But just as I take issue with the overuse of the word fear, I also think he is using the word ‘love’ incorrectly.

We must understand that it’s not what we love that will ruin us. I think it would have been better for Postman to say that what we *crave* will ruin us, for what we *crave* is to feel more and more

through stories that are created for mass consumption and entertainment. These types of stories are designed to keep our attention—not to build a better world.

DJT knows this. He is a TV personality, after all.

I used to think it was nonsense that I lived in a country that would elect a trivial TV personality as the head of our federal government—the most serious job in the world. But I have come to see that it makes perfect sense. The lines between informed discourse and superficial entertainment have been blurred for many decades now. It actually makes perfect sense that we have ended up here. So where does that leave us?

Postman, towards the end of his book admits that, “No medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are” (161).

So, I want to dedicate myself over the coming years to be aware of the ways the news can exhaust me and how easy it is to take a detour into distraction, even when I intend to inform myself.

I don't want to be shocked or perplexed anymore by absurd assertions coming from those with the most power.

Joy is important for survival, so is rest. It is okay to take a break sometimes from the noise and the heartbreak, but it is not okay to turn away completely. I vow to choose to receive the stories that bring joy and inspiration and hope, to let them fuel me. I will work to tune out the stories designed only to enrage me. When it comes to stories of the dangerous consequences of a politician's actions, I will throw away the framing that will send me into a panic and pick out the relevant information that I need in order to act.

I want to observe the strong emotions that come up, note the delivery method of the information I am receiving, and choose, in love, to go straight to the part where I act to protect my community, family and myself—to bring about whatever justice is possible one step at a time, carefully reclaiming my attention and heart. That is where my power lies, for what you pay attention to, grows.

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