

**STORYTELLING
IN CHALLENGING TIMES**

BY MARJORIE FLORESTAL

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*“The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. . . .
Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.”¹*

Introduction

For all the chaos and uncertainty moments of crisis engender, they also present the best opportunity for transformative change. In order to achieve real and lasting results, however, leaders must work not only to resolve the specific challenge but to preserve and strengthen the culture of the institution. In recent weeks, Berkeley Law has faced its own challenge as the Dean resigned after an allegation of sexual harassment. The incident has marked the community, resulting in protests and demands for action from many quarters both within the university community and the culture at large. The story has garnered national attention, most recently with an article from the New York Times entitled “*Sexual Harassment Cases Tarnish Berkeley’s Image as a Center of Social Activism.*”²

While both the University and law school administrators have taken swift and necessary action to address the challenge, experience has shown these measures alone are simply not enough. This incident strikes at the core of the community’s values, and it has elicited strong emotions as a result—a sense of betrayal, anger, and disillusionment, among others. In a letter to University leadership, Berkeley Law’s alumni spoke of “heavy hearts” and the law school’s perceived loss of prestige and admiration within the legal community.³ Community members have publicly questioned the university’s commitment to affect real and meaningful change. One student, quoted in the New York Times, puts it succinctly: “Time and time again, universities when they are faced with problems like this set up a task force. That looks good on paper . . . Berkeley is merely waiting for this issue to

¹ C.F. Black, *The Land is the Source of the Law*, p. 3

² “*Sexual Harassment Cases Tarnish Berkeley’s Image as a Center of Social Activism*” (available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/us/sexual-harassment-cases-tarnish-berkeleys-image-as-a-center-of-social-activism.html>)

³ Letter from Berkeley alumni available at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1G3G6cEgS9BkGCq1U0BQRSyQeolpgMz5rGJeWSCSDvHE/viewform?c=0&w=1>

dissipate from the public eye.”⁴ What is needed in this moment are not only the expected actions that universities have taken “time and time again”—actions like accepting the Dean’s resignation, appointing an interim dean with wide-spread community support, calling for stronger sanctions for offenders, and increasing training requirements for staff—but a commitment to hearing and healing the wounds that have arisen in the wake of this incident.

Research demonstrates that one of the most effective tools for addressing this type of psychologically-loaded conflict is storytelling. Stories engage us through our emotions and give us permission to explore difficult, uncomfortable, and controversial topics. Stories also create pathways for communication and collaboration, allowing us to overcome our defenses and perceived differences; they connect us to each other. We look to story as a way of making sense of our experience and transforming our learning into something meaningful and transcendent. Good stories help to make order out of chaos.

This white paper explores how the ancient tool of narrative and storytelling, combined with modern psychological insights, can help Berkeley Law successfully navigate through these challenging times.

Storytelling: An Ancient Craft in a Modern Context

For thousands of years humans have told stories—stories about the hunt, stories of heroes and antiheroes, stories of crushing defeat and soaring triumph. Why? Because our brains are uniquely wired for story. Dr. Paul Zak, a neuroscientist, has found that the hormone oxytocin puts people in thrall to story. In an experiment conducted in Zak’s lab, subjects watched a series of commercials about childhood cancer patients; these commercials were specifically chosen because they told stories with a strong narrative arc. The experiment subjects saw an increase in their oxytocin and cortisol levels. The change in oxytocin had a positive correlation with participants’ feelings of empathy, which in turn motivated them to donate to the featured charity despite the fact that no overt solicitation had taken place. Zak repeated the study, this time using stories about “hot-button” issues, including stories of racism, gun control and terrorist attacks. The results were equally compelling, leading Zak to conclude: “These findings suggest that emotionally

⁴ Sofie Karasek, a Berkeley graduate student and co-founder of End Rape on Campus, *quoted in, “Sexual Harassment Cases Tarnish Berkeley’s Image as a Center of Social Activism”* (available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/us/sexual-harassment-cases-tarnish-berkeley-image-as-a-center-of-social-activism.html>)

engaging narratives inspire post-narrative actions.”⁵ In short, good stories are biologically transformative and motivate us to take action.

Companies have long recognized the power of story. In major corporations across the world storytelling is now ubiquitous. It is used in branding, strategic planning, customer service training, and to promote more creative and innovative thinking, among other things. Stephen Denning, a former World Bank manager turned business storytelling evangelist, notes that “[t]he choice for leaders in business and organizations is not whether to be involved in storytelling—they can hardly do otherwise—but whether to use storytelling unwittingly and clumsily, or intelligently and skillfully.”⁶ Storytelling is also prevalent in the curricula of business and medical schools across the United States as universities train their students in the art and science of story (law schools have been slow to join the movement, although storytelling itself plays a critical role in law and legal culture). Stanford University has several courses on storytelling, including one titled “The Power of Stories to Fuel Innovation.” In 2009, Columbia Medical School launched a Masters program in Narrative Medicine because of “the power of narrative to change the way care is given and received.”⁷

More recently, the Defense Department has joined the storytelling movement with its Narrative Networks program. The program partners with major universities to research how narratives influence human cognition and behavior, and to apply those findings in international security contexts.⁸ Why do people accept and act on certain kinds of information while dismissing others? What role can narratives play in causing—and helping to treat—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Why are some narrative themes successful at building support for terrorism? These are some of the questions the program has begun to address.

⁵ Paul J. Zak, Ph.D., *Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, available at http://www.dana.org/Cerebrum/2015/Why_Inspiring_Stories_Make_Us_React__The_Neuroscience_of_Narrative/

⁶ Stephen Denning, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*, p. 5.

⁷ Columbia Medical School website <http://sps.columbia.edu/narrative-medicine>

⁸ See <http://www.darpa.mil/program/narrative-networks>

Telling Difficult Stories

In 2009, the New York Times ran a series of articles questioning the value of a law degree. Headlines such as “*Downturn Dims Prospects Even at Top Law Schools*” caught the attention of prospective law students. These stories tapped into a generalized angst over rising tuition, the excessive debt load many law students carried, and the abject state of the legal job market. Within months, some law schools found themselves with a significant decline in applications. While the New York Times articles were not solely responsible for the ensuing disruption in the legal academy, they certainly played an important role. Out of bits and bytes of data, the venerable Gray Lady constructed a story with the power to influence.

Unexpectedly, I found myself caught in the upheaval. My own law school made the decision to “right-size” in the face of declining enrollment. Despite the security of tenure, I opted to accept a buyout and enroll in a graduate psychology program to study the work of Carl Jung. Within moments of my arrival in the Masters program, I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake. In a room full of professors, administrators, new students and old, I was the only person of color. How could this happen in 2014? What did this say of the program’s commitment to diversity? Where was my place in an environment so devoid of racial difference? I approached the program director a few days later and made my case as a former litigator, which is to say that I marshaled facts, statistics and arguments in my favor. Our conversation was uncomfortable, stilted, full of silent anger and defensiveness. I left that meeting feeling unheard and unmet. A part of me wanted to walk out of the university never to return.

My studies in Jungian psychology only served to amplify the question of race. Jung had a problematic relationship with black people—for example, he once interpreted a dream about a black barber as a warning that he was “obviously all too close to going black.”⁹ The Jungian community is overwhelmingly white; there are only three African-American Jungian analysts in the United States. Thus, when I began writing my thesis on race and racism in the Jungian psyche, I feared that my intended audience would not be receptive. It is easy enough to dismiss Jung’s appalling comments as a reflection of the fact that he was “a man of his time.” And in a program in which I was the only person of color, would I be perceived as “too sensitive” to matters of race? Rather than addressing the issue in a traditional

⁹Jo Collins, *The Ethnic Shadow: Jung, Dreams and the Colonial Other at 25* (available at http://ejournals.org.uk/bjll/%5Bpp22-pp30%5D_ARTICLE_3.pdf)

thesis format—focusing on arguments, quotes, and statistics—I opted to write a work of ethnographic fiction. I authored a play that served as an invitation to others to have their own experience of the material. I performed aspects of the play for students as well as the program director, and the experience was astonishing. Where I had previously met resistance and defensiveness, I now found a director who was deeply moved. In return, she was able to share her own concerns about Jung’s handling of difference. She thanked me for creating the *temenos*—a sacred or protected space—for such a difficult conversation to occur.

Stories have a way of moving past our fixed positions and into the heart of the matter. They are particularly effective in handling difficult, sensitive and uncomfortable conversations because the release of oxytocin triggers feelings of empathy, openness, vulnerability, safety and trust. Neuroscientist Paul Zak concludes “[t]o the brain, good stories are good stories, whether . . . on topics happy or sad, as long as they get us to care about their characters.”¹⁰

Constructing Stories

A story only begins when something is out of balance. As noted analyst—and Jung protégé—Marie Louise von Franz wrote “[s]ome trouble always comes at the beginning of the story because otherwise there would be no story.”¹¹ Thus, our task is not to run from trouble but to recognize it as a signal that space is being created for something extraordinary to occur. How might Berkeley Law use that knowledge to navigate these challenging times?

The tendency in moments of trouble is to construct a hero’s narrative, one in which a lone individual saves a frightened community from a dark and primitive threat. This would be a mistake. The hero narrative might make for an excellent movie, but in reality it undermines the community’s agency—and it makes for a predictable and boring story. What makes for a compelling narrative is a multiplicity of stories drawn from protagonists across the community: stories from students, administrators, alumni, the university community, the legal community and the local neighborhood. Moreover, the best stories display what Robert McKee, an expert on story structure, calls “the struggle between expectation and

¹⁰ Paul J. Zak, Ph.D., *Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, available at http://www.dana.org/Cerebrum/2015/Why_Inspiring_Stories_Make_Us_React__The_Neuroscience_of_Narrative/

¹¹ Marie-Louise von Franz, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales*.

reality in all its nastiness.”¹² In short, the story is in the struggle not in a sanitized final rendering that glosses over difficulty in favor of a triumphant, happily-ever-after.

What does this mean, practically speaking, for Berkeley Law? The answer is, of course, complex. Certainly, leaders in both the University and law school must create space for the community to tell its stories, and the leadership in turn must tell its own stories while also speaking to stories from the collective. But an authentic approach to storytelling is not about constructing a formulaic approach or “capturing” the perfect story; one cannot enter the story arena with a fixed agenda. Rather, the process is about listening and giving voice to a communal wound. What happens next is often surprising and original.

About the Author

Marjorie Florestal is a former member of the tenured faculty at McGeorge Law School in Sacramento. She is currently a lecturer in International Trade at Berkeley Law and is in the final weeks of completing a Masters in Psychology at Sonoma State University.

¹² Robert McKee and Bronwyn Fryer, *Storytelling that Moves People*, Harvard Business Review (available at <https://hbr.org/2003/06/storytelling-that-moves-people>)