

**WE ARE ALL BORN  
INTO A MUCH BIGGER  
STORY. WHAT STORIES  
FRAME OUR LIFE  
STORIES?**

# Chapter one

## **ONCE UPON A TIME . . .**

Man is always a teller of tales. He lives surrounded by his stories . . . he sees everything that happens to him through them and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.

Jean-Paul Sartre

The way I see it, life is short. At the time of writing, the average life expectancy in the UK is a meagre 81.5 years. Broken down, that's 978 months, 4,250 weeks or 29,747 days. Given the brevity of life and the enormity of all the world has to offer, each of us will only ever experience a tiny fraction of all that can be experienced. And the cruel part is, we never know just how long we have left. Death could come a-knocking at any moment. None of us knows when our end credits will roll.

We measure age in the number of years that we have lived, but I wonder what the impact on our thinking would be if we were able to measure it in the number of days, weeks, months and years that we have left. How might that change the story we are telling? Would it move things up a gear, having that fresh perspective?

There can be something beautiful about funerals. Now, don't get me wrong, funerals are often the hardest of events, brimming with grief, loss and a sense of questioning. But funerals can also meddle with our perspective for the better. Funerals can be a healthy reminder that death is on its way. Just like a JCB digger forcing away the topsoil of pleasantries and superficiality, they can brutally and beautifully create space for each of us to look into our souls.

As the eulogy is given, we are made to remember our own mortality. Often with a mix of tears and laughter, we reminisce over someone's life story, we celebrate the good they did and the adventures they lived. And sometimes we are left wondering, how will we be remembered? We wonder what story will be told about our lives.

There is now an app for your phone that, taking into account your vital statistics, gives you a predicted countdown on how many days, hours and minutes you have left before you die. This may sound scary, but the intention behind it is to encourage you to embrace a healthier lifestyle and thereby extend your life. The app might help us focus on living well – but it really is just a 'guess-timate'; without a definite countdown it is impossible to know when our time may be up.

Ultimately, the future is a mystery. We live in the uncertainty of not knowing just how long we have left. What we do have is the power to choose, in the here and now of today, how our life story will play out. Today, as another of our possible 29,747 days gets invested in the slot machine of life, we may not

be able to choose exactly what we live, but we can choose *how* we live.



There is a famous scene in the 1970s zombie film *Dawn of the Dead* where two of the lead characters, Francine and Stephen, look down from the rooftop of a shopping mall to see zombies roaming around trying to get into the shops. With a sense of disbelief, Francine asks, ‘What are they doing? Why do they come here?’ Stephen responds, ‘Some kind of instinct. Memory of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives.’ It became a classic scene in movie history because it prophetically depicts the living dead – people who have many of the attributes of being alive but no sense of meaning or purpose. People existing rather than living.

Though we wouldn’t like to admit it, this sentiment can be seen in many aspects of our own lives. We may post on social media so that people can ‘like’ us without even thinking of whether it really matters. Or we might operate on autopilot, switching on the TV as soon as we arrive home because we’d rather busy our minds with stories of others than fully engage with our own. We look to the sleight of hand again and again, even when we know deep down that the true magic isn’t to be found there.

I wonder, sometimes, if the sleight of hand has left us focusing on the wrong things and missing out on what life is all about. But how do we avoid focusing on the wrong things? How do we make sure that we don’t live life on autopilot? Ultimately, how do we find a story worth living?

## JOURNEY

This book is a journey into the world of stories. We're going to begin by looking at why stories are so important, then we're going to explore the three main stories we tell ourselves over and over again in the Western world.

First, there is the story of happiness: that life is about enjoying what is on offer. Like squeezing the last bit of toothpaste out of a tube, life is for squeezing every bit of pleasure out of our short time here on earth. The second is about safety. The world is a scary, messed-up place and the aim of the game is to try to make ourselves as safe as we can. The third story that I believe we live for in the West is the narrative about significance. We want our life story to have mattered. And if our existence is just some great accident, then we have to create meaning and purpose so that we can find some kind of significance in the story we live.

The next three chapters are an exploration of these commonly held stories. They present an opportunity to think about the story your life is telling and what you really want it to say. We'll then move on to the whole idea of meta-narratives – the idea that there are bigger stories that frame the smaller stories we tell ourselves every day.

And then I will pitch you the God story – the story we find in the pages of the Bible. This is the story I have chosen to frame my own life and I will offer you my reasoning as to why I think it makes sense. From this point, I want to explore what the God story means for our lives. I will explore God as the central character. I

will explain why I don't think we are meant to be the centre of our story, and how there is something beautiful about discovering what it means for us to be a character in *his* story. We'll then get really practical in the last couple of chapters, looking at our unique role in history, and how we can discover our subplot in God's unfolding narrative.

## THE POWER OF STORY

Before digging deeper into the God story, or even our personal stories, it helps to see just how important stories are. Whether or not you are 'a reader' doesn't matter, because it's impossible to deny that stories are everywhere. We often think of stories being entombed in books and films, but the truth is, stories are all around us.

Every day we receive dozens of stories from the adverts that adorn street hoardings, our TV screens and our social media channels. It's fascinating how advertisers frequently don't even feature the product in the commercial; instead they tell us a story rich in emotion that somehow connects with our very being. As McDonald's celebrated its fortieth anniversary, there were no perfect photographs of a Big Mac positioned next to a cold Coke, condensation running down the side of the cup. Instead, there were a series of images that depicted milestone moments.

The 'brave little soldier treat' photograph showed a young boy in the back of the car with his arm in plaster, a Happy Meal just in view. The 'just passed your driving test drive-thru' depicted a young driver with a perfectly positioned green 'P' plate driving past a McDonald's serving window. The campaign was not directly

selling us burgers but telling us stories that would engage with our emotions, reminding us of deep memories. They were helping us associate the golden arches brand with key life moments, in turn writing McDonald's into our own memories.

Our news media pump us with stories whenever we glance at a screen or wade through a paper. Whichever incident is being reported, the coverage we choose to follow dictates the story that is being told. The reporters tell us who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. These stories saturate our lives.

Most days we pass by without thinking about the monuments and graveyards that punctuate our cities, towns and villages. Interestingly, commemorative monuments are nearly always built by the victors, reinforcing a story that might not be wholly true. These monuments remind us of our past, the cost of freedom, the heroes of history. And graveyards remind us of our future, our mortality, our 81.5 years. Our life story might one day just become a short epitaph on a moss-covered gravestone hiding in the shadows of an overgrown cemetery.

The songs we sing, the box sets we watch, the clothes we wear, the shopping centres we frequent, the people we live with, the coffee we drink – all these tell a story. Stories are the glue that shape our conversations, our interactions and our very thoughts. The poet Muriel Rukeyser famously unpacked the idea that the universe is not really made of atoms but of stories. For Rukeyser, they are the heartbeat of our very existence, but what makes stories so powerful?

## STORIES GIVE CONTEXT

First, stories give context. They help us make order out of chaos. Whenever we see something unusual or unexpected, like a broken-down car, we say, 'I wonder what's happened there?' We yearn for a story to help us make sense of what we have witnessed. Stories help us understand what's going on.

I was gripped when I first started reading Dean Karnazes' book *Ultramarathon Man*. He begins with the description of a random conversation he has with a pizza delivery man. It's nearing midnight and Dean is ordering pizza for himself; but he doesn't order a pizza for one but a family-sized pizza. Then he goes on to order not just one piece of cheesecake but an entire cheesecake. And on top of that he asks for a flask of coffee.

The already confused pizzeria man now asks for the delivery address, and Dean says that he wants it to be delivered to the edge of a highway, miles from the nearest houses. The scene, as it unfolds, leaves the reader confused too, until you discover that Dean is an ultra-marathon runner, running 170 miles straight through the night. He is desperate for calories to keep himself going. As the pizza is delivered, he rolls it up in one hand like a taco and carries on running off into the night, munching away. The story gives context. It helps us understand what's going on.

Somewhere between Babygros and mastering the alphabet in nursery, children embark on a stage of life where they want to question *everything*. My daughter was no exception. When she was two, she would often ask, 'Can you tell me a story about that?'

Even as a toddler she understood that within the context of a story, complex things could begin to make more sense.

As we search for our life story, we become aware that we find ourselves in a bigger story that gives our life context. We have all been brought up with some kind of understanding of family that has shaped our worldview. The values of our parents, the things we experienced, the religious systems we grew up with, the very fact that our families were present or distant, all frame our life's story. Whenever life stories are retold in books, documentaries or films, they often pinpoint a key moment in childhood – when a wrong was witnessed, a passion was birthed or a skill noticed – that changed the trajectory of the individual's life, either for good or for evil.

But more than just family, the community that surrounds us in our formative years, with both its generosity and its prejudice, will give us a backdrop to understanding our life story. And more than family and local community, we are born into a much bigger story – one that is being played out among nations and multi-nationals framed by human history. Now as never before we live in a time period when technology is king and the world's issues are available online for all to see in HD quality.

Part of discerning our story is discerning the bigger story in which we find ourselves. It's about understanding our context and the story that has been spoken over our lives.

## STORIES GET BENEATH OUR SKIN

But stories do more than give us context. They have the ability to move us to tears and to laughter. Stories get beneath our skin.

In the world of child psychology, the power of story is being realized. Children with behavioural problems, for example, often find it hard to express themselves with words. When talking through issues they can feel pressurized, almost as if they are being interrogated, and so there is a growing trend towards 'play therapy'. Through role play and storytelling, children are given a freedom to explore emotions and express feelings. Creating stories with figurines or painting or acting out scenarios can give children the chance to operate at their own pace and process emotions they would otherwise find difficult to articulate. Stories have the power to open that vault of emotions we sometimes want to keep firmly closed.

Stories also have the potential to be emotive enough to challenge our very core; we get transported into an experience of life in somebody else's shoes. Many stories that have been told brilliantly in books and on cinema screens have changed perceptions on issues such as gender, race and culture. As readers and audiences emotionally experience the reality of other people's existence, mindsets can be transformed.

The power of story in changing belief systems was particularly well executed in a number of British university cities in 1984, a time when apartheid still existed in South Africa. Barclays was involved in maintaining the system of apartheid in its banks,

where ‘Whites Only’ signs were customary. In the UK activists took to retelling this story using graffiti. Where there were pairs of Barclays ATM machines, above one was spray-painted the word ‘blacks’ and above the other ‘whites only’. This one act of defiance enabled people to experience the story of apartheid bringing the evil reality of a distant land into the sharp focus on our shores. It left people feeling unsettled, and the knock-on effect was that fewer graduates applied to work at Barclays and students refused to bank with Barclays. By 1986, Barclays had pulled out of its investment in South Africa.

Finding our story is in part about understanding what makes us tick. It’s about discovering our passions, our needs, our humanity. Stories allow us to be immersed, to have our emotions meddled with and our hearts changed. That is the power of story.

### **STORIES HELP US UNDERSTAND WHAT WE WANT**

Stories give context. Stories enable us to experience. And stories help us understand what we want.

It was Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, who first articulated the idea that although all civilizations create their own stories, clothed in their own cultural nuances, in fact every story has the same basic structure. He argued that the basic structure of any good story involves the journey of a hero.

The first fundamental part is that the hero must want something – whether it’s to find love, win the FA Cup or stop an alien invasion. Think of any great film and you will instantly know what the hero wants. Dory wants to find Nemo. Marty wants to get back

to the future. James Bond wants to stop the bad guys. The hero wants something.

The second fundamental part is that the hero, driven by a need, has to move into an unfamiliar situation and adapt to it. The protagonist, desperate for love, sets out on a blind date; a football player eager for success leaves his family to join a new club; or our hero climbs aboard a new spaceship in want of adventure. For the story to be really moving, the new surroundings will create significant conflict and challenge, pushing the hero to the edge of their capabilities. Story consultant and university professor Bobette Buster, who has worked in the film industry with Pixar, Disney and Sony, puts it like this: 'If you want to turn a nice guy into a hero, you've got to put him through hell. It's in this furnace of challenge that the true colours of the hero are revealed.'<sup>1</sup>

Third, after the want and the challenge, the hero gets what they desire – though it might not be what they first set out for. For the story to be compelling, the cost must be great. The character desperate for love finds the perfect soulmate but has to deal with his own selfishness in order to win her over. The footballer faces criticism, almost gives up and has to train harder than ever; he fails to win the FA Cup but discovers that success is about more than trophies – it is about being the best he can be. The hero loses her comrades to obscure penguin lookalike aliens but manages to protect planet Earth.

Finally, the fourth part of the story is about the hero returning to familiarity, having been changed by the experience. The groom

gives his speech on the wedding day. The footballer is back with his family. The spaceship lands to cheering crowds.

This basic structure has been utilized by numerous great storytellers over the last 60 years. George Lucas, creator of the Star Wars films, refers to Joseph Campbell as ‘my Yoda’, highlighting the significant role the author played in explaining the science behind good stories.

You see, stories help us understand what we want – how we can be a hero. They help us navigate the choices we have to make every day. This simple premise, that a good story is about a character who wants something and has to overcome conflict to get it, helps us live a good story.

The problem comes when we don’t want something significant. The story of a character who just wants a nice holiday isn’t particularly compelling – a holiday doesn’t seem that important. At the same time, wanting something significant is not enough. If the main character doesn’t have to overcome some kind of difficulty to get what she wants, then the odds are it’s a pretty boring story. The story of a millionaire doing good to others will not be interesting if it costs her nothing more than some spare pocket change. There is no conflict. Compelling stories combine a noble cause alongside real conflict.

### **BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WANT**

In reality, we aren’t always conscious of what we want; we may not know what the narrative is that is driving our story. Sometimes we avoid asking the uncomfortable questions and skip over the conflicts in our lives.

There is a famous saying, that the two most important days in your life are the day you are born, and the day you find out why. There's some real truth in that. We often float through life until the day we discover a cause worth living and dying for – something that makes life more consistent, rather than a series of film frames. But the issue is that very few people have a day when everything suddenly becomes clear. A lot more common, I think, are smaller moments of clarity when we discover a little more of our calling, our purpose, the story for our lives. These moments allow us to position ourselves for what might be in store next.

The philosopher James Bryan Smith writes: 'Narrative is the central function . . . of the human mind. We turn everything into a story in order to make sense of life. We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In fact, we cannot avoid it. We are storied creatures.'<sup>2</sup> As storied creatures, perhaps we need to turn off the autopilot, being proactive rather than merely playing the role that society presumes of us. Maybe it's time to be more aware of selective attention – to make sure we aren't duped into becoming the living dead transfixed by our smartphones.

Stories help us understand why someone would want a pizza delivered to the edge of a motorway at midnight. Stories move us and change mindsets. And stories help us understand what we want, whether that is to fight off aliens or battle real-life issues like extreme poverty. Now let's take this gift of life seriously and live the greatest story possible.

The story we choose for our lives has huge ramifications. Our story will direct how we live out our time on earth and ultimately will determine how we view ourselves. And with this as our backdrop, and the three stories that I think we live for in the Western world as our starting point, let's explore how we begin to find a story for our lives.