

Cultural Stories and Media Storytelling

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United States

Cultural stories

On a fundamental level, the facts and science that allow us to “reason together” in a democracy and the stories that serve to bind us together as people are inherently at odds with each other.

By cultural “myth,” I don’t mean something untrue but, rather, a story of meaning or value or reality that a group of people live in without question. Each organizing myth has an ideal, characteristic behaviors, archetypal actors, and usual modes of communication. In medieval times in Europe, for example, society lived within a Christian religious myth in which even kings had to recognize the authority of the Pope. Beginning with the Renaissance, a new cultural myth began to emerge in the west, culminating in the Enlightenment, in which the source of authority was grounded in science and philosophy. In politics, the divine right of kings began to give way to philosophic arguments such as “all men are created equal.”

Unlike the religious myth, in which different groups followed different sub-myths and sometimes fought each other, science was the first truly universal myth. The Enlightenment made it possible to win arguments with facts rather than brute force. While the Enlightenment myth was theoretically universal, it was not really global because only an educated elite, trained to understand proofs and conduct reasoned, fact-based arguments, could participate in it.

We are now in an economic myth, the first truly global myth, because it rests on images and numbers (counting, not math), to which everyone has access, no matter the language or education level. It is inherently egalitarian because every dollar is equal to every other dollar, no matter who owns it. But, without influence from other sources of value, it is also inevitably destabilizing, undercutting social cohesion as some people

gain more dollars than others with no overarching framework or hierarchy of values to make sense of individual sacrifice for the general good.

While new myths emerge, the old myths don't go away, no matter what myth serves as an organizing center of society. Most people live in more than one myth, even though most societies now are organized around a global economic myth, where the ideal is growth rather than goodness (religious myth) or the pursuit of truth (Enlightenment myth). And the oldest myth of all – the hero myth – is still the basis of our sports and entertainment and models of leadership.

Journalists have to operate under three different myth systems: the economic myth because they have to make money; the Enlightenment myth because the profession values facts; and the hero myth, because to attract a large number of viewers or readers, journalists have to tell compelling stories.¹

The Myths That Have Made Us

-- Betty Sue Flowers

	Hero	Religious	Democratic / Scientific	Economic	Ecological (emerging)
Ideal	Excellence	Goodness	Truth	Growth	Health (Wholeness)
Behavior	Competition	Obedience	Reason	Maximizing advantage	Communication
Actors	Heroes	Saints Prophets	Philosophers Scientists	Consumers Business	Creators
Communication	Stories	Scripture Prayer	Mathematics Logical arguments	Images Numbers Data	Self-expression

Image 1

Media storytelling

The Renaissance and the printing press rose together. By the time the Enlightenment myth became an organizing principle around which democracies formed, newspapers and other sources of information were already splitting into two broad streams: entertainment and fact-based information.

Even for fact-based publications, however, the need for stories remains. Newspapers have to sell, so news “stories” have to be compelling even if rigorously fact-checked. Since the natural mode of storytelling involves a hero in action, even science news tends to focus on individual discoverers rather than the collaborative and iterative process that leads to a scientific conclusion; and political news is usually more about the horse-race of elections than the details of policy. As Aristotle noticed centuries ago, drama involves conflict. The story of violent conflict is as old as drama itself. “If it bleeds, it leads,” as the journalistic saying goes.

In the Enlightenment/scientific myth, the search for truth is carried out through procedures and proofs; in the economic myth, the “most” wins – polls tell us what is so. In the hero myth, truth is mostly irrelevant because a story is a spectacle. The Enlightenment leader is one who attempts to provide better policies – but reporting on policies (Are they true? Are they good?) is more like literary criticism than storytelling. It may be intelligent and important, but it will appeal narrowly to elites. It is not surprising that in the US Presidential election campaign of 2016, even left-leaning newspapers gave Donald Trump and his explosive rallies far more column inches of coverage than Hillary Clinton and her policy plans.

The gravitational pull of the hero myth for storytelling

The founders of the United States knew what had happened to the Athenian and Roman democracies, which is one reason they built in safeguards such as the electoral college and a republican rather than a democratic structure of government. The intentional disfunction of the checks and balances built into the US Constitution was intended to block the takeover of the government by a demagogue backed by a mob. Freedom of the press was considered to be an important guarantor of democracy because the press could expose corruption without fear – it could “enlighten” the population with the truth.

But the hero myth, based on conflict and providing compelling spectacle, is the ground of compelling stories. A football game attracts far more viewers than policy analysis. Even with no intention to do so, storytellers will linger on the man yelling to a crowd, especially where there is potential violence because there is *action waiting for a storyteller*. A candidate talking about policy leaves room only for a chronicler – a recorder of facts – and not a storyteller.

Throughout his 2016 campaign, Trump presented himself as a savior of the common people, not a condescending elitist, like his opponent, who called his followers “deplorables.” His lies were inconsequential to his followers because they could see he was standing for them, mocking and threatening the elitists and their “fake” media. At his rallies, he confined reporters in a kind of cage and hinted often that violence towards them would be justifiable, even patriotic.

How Elitists
(Enlightenment Myth)

talk to

Populists
(Religious and Hero
Myths)

Stop asking candidates if
they “believe in” climate
change and start asking
if they understand it.

It’s science,
not Santa Claus.

@TheValorieClark

Image 2

Throughout his presidency Trump exploited the inherent tensions between the Enlightenment myth and the hero myth. He presented himself as a powerful leader, even retweeting heroic images of himself and presenting himself as triumphant over Covid by posing on a balcony, Mussolini-style, as soon as he returned from the hospital.



Image 3

He presented his policies as a kind of religious war against globalism and global human values versus freedom and American values. And the followers who sold hats

and t-shirts and banners outside his rallies depicted him as a Spartacus of the common man, armed and ready to fight.

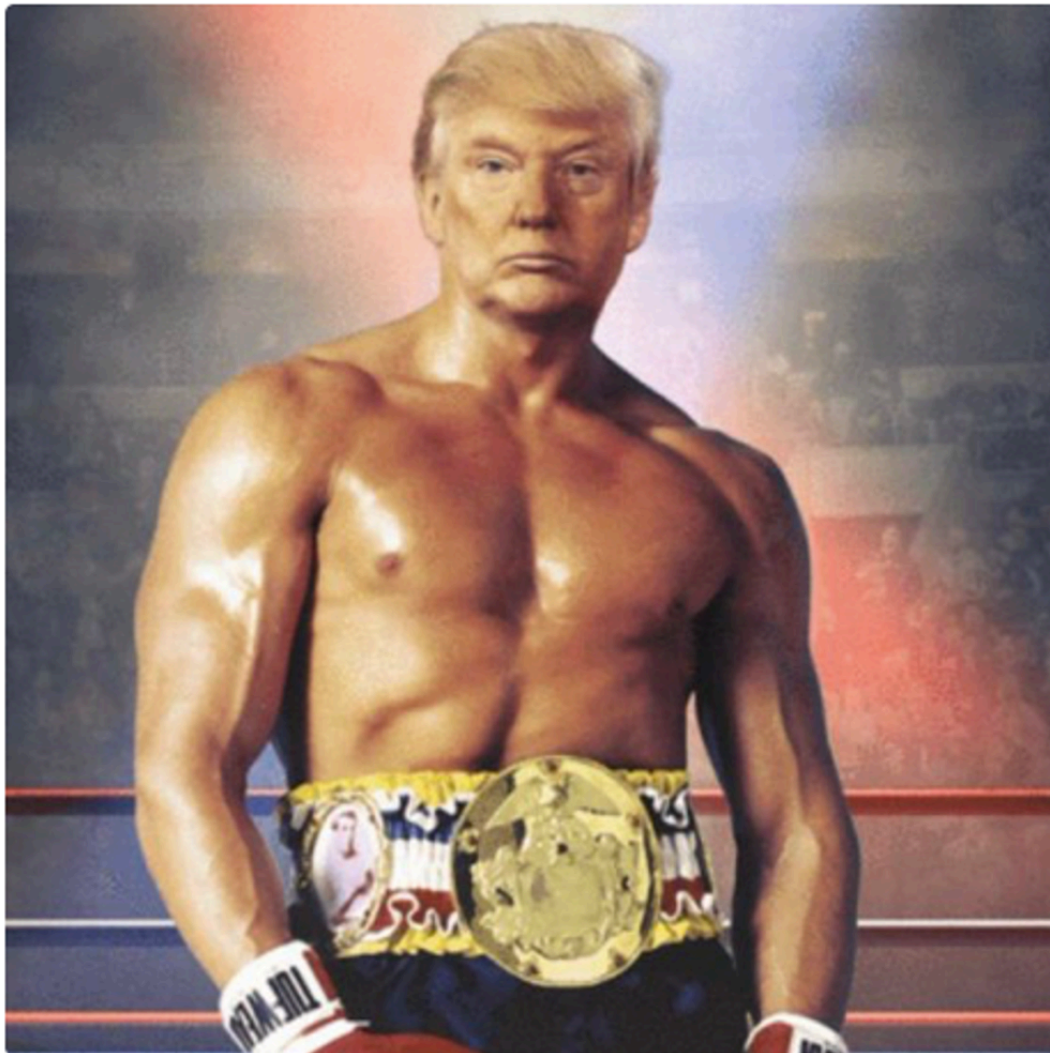


Image 4

In the 2020 presidential campaign, Trump presented himself as the virile hero versus the weak senex, Biden, sleepy and hiding in a basement. He was healthy not because he exercised and watched his weight, like Biden, but because he was naturally strong – he was born that way. The media could point out the fake tan, dyed hair, make-up, corset, heel lifts, extra weight – but none of that mattered because his followers recognized the archetype of the hero, no matter how it was created. When Trump retweeted an image of himself photoshopped onto the body of the movie hero “Rocky,” he knew his followers

wouldn't laugh. They would understand that he was *performing* the role of the hero. Reporters then found themselves critics of a reality tv show, fatally captured by the hero myth even as they deplored it.

 **Donald J. Trump**  
@realDonaldTrump



♥ 694K 10:54 AM - Nov 27, 2019



Image 5

The role of the religious myth in the 2020 US election

The religious myth is based not on reason but on correct belief that can't be challenged. From that point of view, it's not the content that matters so much as how that content is held. Shunning an unpopular point of view is an action from within the religious myth. A belief held in common is a powerful unifying force, serving to hold a tribe together. And the more unbelievable the belief, in logical terms, the more it serves to distinguish the tribe.

The conspiracy theories that proliferated on social media, especially those connected with QAnon, served to define a tribe prepared to enact violence on behalf of Donald Trump. The motto of QAnon is "Where We Go One, We Go All."



A QAnon supporter participated in a pro-police rally in Brooklyn, N.Y., in early August.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE KEITH/REUTERS

Image 6

The algorithms that fed mildly curious internet explorers more and more bizarre stories utilized the same compelling features that stories do – one thing leads to another until a willing suspension of disbelief leads you to an exhilarating new experience. What makes a better story – that Hillary Clinton is a hard-working, feminist, Methodist policy wonk? Or, as QAnon followers believe, that she is the ringleader of a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping, cannibalistic pedophiles running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against President Trump? The second story defines a tribe and acts as a call to action.

The combination of followers acting within the religious myth (adherence to belief without question) to support a demagogue willing to perform the role of messianic hero and storytellers captured within the hero myth as a way to boost readers and ratings within the economic myth we live in is a “clear and present danger” to democracy. Recognizing the powerful interactions of these cultural myths is a first step away from being entrapped by them.

To go further, we would need to nurture the evolving ecological myth of health for all and for the planet, with its celebration of individual creativity and an ethic of caring. Perhaps then we could also evolve towards a politics of civility and problem-solving and reserve our tribal passions for sports events, where conflict is expressed in rule-bound ways and for a limited time and where the heroes don't lead us to kill our fellow citizens in the name of democracy.

Betty Sue Flowers (U.S.) is Professor Emerita-UT Austin and former director of the Johnson Presidential Library. She has consulted for the Aspen Institute, NASA, CIA, and the U.S. Navy, and written futures scenarios for Shell, OAS, OECD, WEC, the Five

Eyes, WBCSD, Malaysia, Oman, and Slovenia, among others. Her publications include two collections of poetry; *Browning and the Modern Tradition*, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, and, as editor, *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, *Synchronicity: the Inner Path of Leadership*, *Realistic Hope: Facing Global Challenges*, and *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*.

¹ The ideas captured in this table were first explored in Betty Sue Flowers, *The Economic Myth*, a monograph published by the Center for International Business Education and Research, Graduate School of Business, University of Texas, 1995. They were later expanded in *The American Dream and the Economic Myth* (in the series *Essays on Deepening the American Dream*, sponsored by the Fetzer Institute, 2007) and republished in *Huff Post* (2013) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/betty-sue-flowers/the-american-dream-and-th_b_3575951.html.