

# How Great Founders Tell Their Story

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## SUMMARY

*The discussion revolves around the concept of narrative as a fundamental element in understanding personal and organizational identity. The speaker emphasizes the importance of three layers of storytelling—external mechanics, emotional significance, and philosophical beliefs—highlighting how these layers can transform how individuals and businesses communicate their purpose and vision.*

- *Everything in society can be viewed as a narrative, which can inspire and mobilize people when articulated effectively.*
- *The three layers of storytelling include:*
  - *External: What is being done (product or service).*
  - *Emotional: The personal "why" behind the actions of founders or individuals.*
  - *Philosophical: The broader beliefs about how the world should operate.*
- *Effective storytelling often combines familiar elements with new insights, making it relatable and understandable.*
- *Companies struggle to articulate their narratives due to the complexity of their operations and the overwhelming nature of framing their purpose philosophically.*
- *Great stories often involve characters overcoming obstacles, reflecting the universal human experience of striving for potential amidst fears and conflicts.*
- *The discussion touches on the importance of calculated risk-taking and the value of failure as part of the creative process.*
- *Leaders are seen as those who embrace responsibility and communicate effectively across various contexts, helping others understand their roles in achieving a shared vision.*
- *Ultimately, storytelling serves as a means to explore deeper truths about existence, human experience, and the nature of desire and fear.*

Everything is a narrative. Really, anything in society is some version of a narrative. When predicate understanding of what is actually happening is made conscious and it's communicated in a way that doesn't quite name the thing was able to metaphorically describe it, it can be extremely inspiring because it simply it seems that these three elements of the external, the internal and the philosophical combined unlock something that that moves people very deeply.

I'd love to ask a bunch of questions about work that you've done with companies and helping the founders of those companies distill down the narrative of them, their business, their product in a way that's transformative for them. I know you've done this with startups. You've done this with massive companies we probably can't name. Um it's it's a thing you've done over and over again. Can you describe this thing that you've done with a number of people in as much detail like crazy detail as you're willing to? Like the the method that has started to

emerge from you this curiosity you have about certain builders and what you do with that curiosity and how you help them. When you talk to someone about this like self-knowledge exploration or something, is the thing after the underlying reason that they themselves may not know yet why they're doing what they're doing? Is that is does it boil down to that?

>> The way I I I think of it is the story works in three layers. One, there's the external mechanics of how the character interacts in the world and you can substitute character for product. That's a requirement and in the case of technology, it's technical. You got to have something that people works, right? I mean there's there's no way around that. And then there are two more layers which is a um a subjective layer of why is this series of events important to me and what does it mean to me personally? And then there is a philosophical layer and on a philosophical level it it's probably where you try to find out and you have to steel man this and it's very easy to straw man it but you got to steel man it. how you believe the world works today and what people believe makes a good world cuz everyone most of the time believes they're doing what is the right thing and what it needs to be done the way it's done for a reason and they're mostly not wrong. Right? So, so there's a almost intractable philosophical beliefs of how the world works and why that's a good thing and then you juxtapose that with your own personal philosophy of the dominant worldview is actually wrong and you supplant that with your own personal philosophy and ideally you do this you know there's four or five points and and you do it on a uh on a direct reputational basis. So each one you say everyone believes this I believe that when this is steelman is really helpful and then you do the same. So this is on a sort of global um level about how how the world and when we talk about world it's probably specific to whatever it is you're building or or running um and then you do that for the personal as well.

So you can do it for a customer, you can do it for a person you're selling to. How do they believe things should be done and you juxtapose that with what you think should be done? >> I I want to just like drill on these three layers of the story >> and try to turn it into a device that someone could like take away from this and try to apply to themselves. If I'm listening uh and I'm curious about >> I'll just keep it grounded in business like the story of my business at these three levels. Is there a good question that I could ask like prompt myself with to get at the external, the emotional and the philosophical? Can you think of a question one question for each?

>> The external would be what are we doing, right? What are we making? What are we selling? What are we buying? Whatever it may be as the core function of the company. The the philosophical is the is the why on a more abstract level. So you believe in certain certain ideals a certain way you believe that the world should be um on an abstract level. The emotional is a personal why in the founders case it's very often why they are doing it right so there is an origin story around that they will recruit people consciously or unconsciously that is in the similar vein and you can get very theoretical about this if you if you want to right I think for the majority of people it's a it's a visual visceral personal experience that other people can relate to if it's a large organization why one does this on a personal level and it's it's these three things working in concert >> picking up where the other leaves off and sort of having a trifecta dance.

>> So, so maybe to rebuild it in the other direction, the questions are something like how should the world be in a in a general sense >> or how how do we believe or how do I believe in a good life? >> Yep. The second layer is

why am I doing this? Like what is it about my specific story that maps back onto that? And the third is what are we doing about it? And if you tell the company's story in that way, what does it galvanize that makes it worth pursuing in the first place?

Because it seems like the thing that I encounter over and over again is even companies making something really great don't know how to talk about themselves for whatever reason. I'm curious why you think that is like why companies struggle with that and then why there's such a payoff to doing the work to figure it out. >> I think sometimes it's because doing the thing is so difficult and complex. um that the idea of having to frame this now on top of everything else in some sort of philosophical way is overwhelming and and doesn't even seem necessary at times. Um, of course, it's always present and people just are not conscious of it. I think that's very often the case that it's all there. It just hasn't been unearthed yet. Um, which is great fun because the second you give people these these tools, they're just frameworks to live within, right? They're decision-m frameworks.

Everything is a narrative. Really anything in society is is some version of a narrative. Right? When this is made conscious. So when the predicate understanding of what is actually happening is made conscious and it's communicated in a way that doesn't quite name the thing but has met is able to metaphorically describe it. It can be extremely inspiring. Um because it simply it seems that these three elements of the external, the internal and the philosophical combined unlock something that that moves people very deeply. I was at Stanford when when the turnaround for Apple sort of in its second inning. I should not be using baseball metaphors because I have no idea what they are.

So it was but this was a man who had a philosophy of of sort of a personal worldview and knew exactly what he was fighting against at all times and then acted according accordingly with unbelievable discipline and courage and created something that was a work of art in many ways. Right? He literally wanted to make business art and he kind of did. every one of these instances is completely unique obviously and but I think that is what's possible. It also makes makes it just more interesting in general, right?

I mean, it it's very it's very easy to be conformist in some sense because you know what's expected, but there's a lot left on the table, too. Um, at the same time, espousing a new narrative or finding a predicated understanding um just unlocks a ton, right? It doesn't need to be this life-changing. Um, sometimes they can be incremental and just unlock a whole new world of of of potential that is very easily implemented. In many ways, stories are very good at creating symbols which represent some sort of transcendental belief that people participate in in the sense that everyone has an ultimate concern, something that they're in absolute ways concerned about. We won't talk about it, but it can be many different kinds of things. It can it can be uh it can be money. It can be a deity. It can it can be truth. To be able to present a an ultimate concern around around a business organization that makes a makes a product um of of some kind I think fulfills personal life picture for the people you're communicating it to. So it just it feels more important. It feels truer uh and it feels more meaningful and worthwhile. We're going to talk a lot about applying some of these principles to the world of building companies or making things. One of the very first things I can remember you teaching me is something to the effect of uh everyone focuses on the new when trying to tell you about their thing, >> but that the right approach is actually like maybe only 20% new and 80% familiar or something like that. Can you say more about

this principle of storytelling or of delivering a message or conveying something to people that the the trap we fall in of just trying to just focus on the exciting new thing?

>> The the interesting thing about this whole world is that there are no rules to it, right? It's just sort of everyone gleans and and tries to come up with rules for themselves that sometimes that seem to work more often than they don't work, but there's no book on this really. Um Raymond Loy the designer had a similar rule right around 8020. This is sort of the the most tolerable element of new um before it's rejected by the human mind as incomprehensible with the idea of originality and creativity. There's a sort of tension even that of itself is a story. There's this tension where where especially now originality is highly prized and and and there's sort of this belief that only the very new is truly novel with storytelling especially but I even think maybe this is confirmation bias but I even think in in business or in innovation the new is is really just the obvious uncovered through systematic trial and error over a certain period of time. So that by striving to stay within the obvious and trying to find a variation on the obvious, I think you have a higher chance at least in storytelling of of discovering something novel that will still feel intelligible enough to categorize in the world. Some people have an ability to see something truly new and immediately categorize it and those people tend to be very successful investors for instance. But generally speaking, I think the the idea of original is overrated and the great filmmakers know this. For instance, great novelists um know this that you can begin with something very familiar and make it feel totally new incrementally.

>> Tell me about the uh the short film that you like so much that's nothing more than a camera panning back and forth. It it was a project where simply there's a camera installed in the room and the the camera would move back and forth across the room and each time uncover a little bit more of the room and nothing else happens. There's no payoff to it. But the the suspense of seeing a little bit more information about the room is absolutely riveting. Even just this tiny amount of new information being given creates enormous suspense because somehow we're good at anticipating.

We're really always anticipating. Each new piece of information gets put into some kind of puzzle. So by the end, the suspense is unbearable. >> If you think about the power of communicating by starting with the familiar and the known, how would you encourage CEOs, companies, people talking about their thing? Use that truth. Like what is the method that you've seen the best explain accepted reality before trying to explain their new thing? like is there a method that comes out of this that you think is useful to founders especially as the group that I'm the most interested in?

>> I think the reason storytelling to me is so effective is because you you have you have a subjective point of view that an individual can relate to because it it's sort of imitating and processing the the charact the character's point of view. So it's subjective in that way. um subjective access to to in storytelling it would be a universal truth but that can be only accessed subjectively. >> Does that mean that uh in trying to reach the mind of a customer let's say the right thing or allocation of time for the founder is to spend most of their time understanding the natural story of the customer as it currently exists versus how it should be and then build off of that.

>> Yeah, >> I think that's exactly right. It's easy to forget that you're dealing with human beings, right? Who have a human experience at the same time as having a professional experience. And and story is really good at at seeing these two layers at the same time. There's a subjective experience that a human being has and then there's the professional experience on top of it. And I think you want to combine these two uh and understand you're dealing with human beings first and foremost. And I think the greatest founders and the greatest builders understand this instinctively.

What did you learn running studios? You've made or been a part of making so many things, so many movies. >> Yeah, I always ran this sort of midsize places. I never ran a sort of a Warner Brothers type place simply because I thought they don't make the kinds of movies I'm particularly good at or interesting interested in. At the same time, I it takes it's a very specific skill set to run the big ones. So, I I ran the mid-size ones. I think it has to do with being able to communicate in different worlds which is actually quite difficult because you have to speak the language of filmmakers who live in their own in their own world and then you have to speak the language of corporate because their reporting requirements and and business requirements and then you you have to speak the the language of um marketing and sales. You are a communicator between worlds. uh and your job is to understand the language of film making and the language of business and the language of marketing and run interference so the thing can happen.

>> What uh could CEOs learn from filmmakers or two groups that like lead a group of people to make a thing? I've always been have this weird obsession with filmmakers. I don't know why. Maybe it's the the fact that the thing they make like hasn't it it ends like the project ends and then it's on to the next. It's not just this like continuous thing that you have to constantly build. And that's appealing to me in some way. You've worked with some of the, you know, amazing filmmakers and and seen, you know, appreciated their art. What could one learn from the other?

>> I come back to this ability and willingness to take ultimate responsibility, right? Which is really not what most people want to do at all. And for some reason, especially filmmakers that have a true vision of what it is they want to be doing, which means they they're birthing, right, this this project. and then take ultimate responsibility from beginning to end and then do it again and then do it again each time risking, you know, total failure staking their entire being on this one next thing.

They're running these pretty big temporary startups um that get funding from the outside world, right? They get distribution from someone else, not themselves. So I think it's it's the the courage and it's also courage to espouse that particular worldview and all the great filmmakers have a very particular worldview. I think it's extraordinary that this exists at all in the world. Someone like that exists who will do that even if it fails and then is willing to do it again. Some of the CEOs I've gotten to know, they're also artists in some ways, right? because this is this is difficult stuff, you know, especially when you have 100,000 employees. I mean, and you're owning it, too. To answer the question more precisely, I think it's this the willingness and the courage to espouse a specific kind of world view that perhaps is a little bit counter but sends in some tension to the dominant worldview and own that. Anyways, >> having been and worked with lots of CEOs that have chosen this like ultimate responsibility, h how would you articulate the job of a CEO? Like in your experience when you've seen

people do that job well or do it poorly? What what what are the good ones in some like basic sense doing really well? society is communication and that because of its complexity, communication breaks down into buckets of specialty, but it's in essence being a master communicator of an almost infinite amount of buckets and knowing to context switch between them and understanding the language games and each one of these buckets plays, but never forgetting the core principles underneath all this. Some of it is unspoken. the people I've observed as especially as one person that I admire enormously who's doing a massive turnaround and he was been communicating the same marching waters for two years to this huge company and everyone around him was in doubt and the results are finally coming in and he's right and he's sort of imposed he's willing against all these obstacles but he was able to do it because he could communicate exactly what he was doing almost in these three layers to anyone but always adjusting never the philosophy, but always sort of adjusting the emotional component to whomever he was speaking to so that each person could hear the point that needed to be conveyed so they could be at peace knowing that they done their bit for this thing to work out and to be able to communicate that in such a way that the people you're speaking to can hear it.

Um because you're adjusting this emotional um subjective emotional component to them. That to me is the secret of great communication. >> What is an iconic character to you? And and I asked that because I feel like most people maybe selfishly want themselves to be like an iconic character in their own story, their company, you know, to be an iconic thing in the world that it operates. Like you think about iconic characters, what are the what things come to mind? My view today and it might change but has probably to do with um an ability to be a Greek hero which means to to live and espouse a world view that is universally disliked. That's iconic. I'm I'm really interested on this pure narrative level in what Elon Musk is doing because it's it is so unconcerned with the traditional hero trajectory is almost Greek and and this idea of the breaking societal rules if you will that um you get to some platonic ideal right that is worth more than acceptance. And I think all all stories have in common the idea of of resilience, right? That this that a character will overcome these obstacles and things are not working and there's enough knowledge and enough power to go where one must go or one has impelled or has been impelled to go and keep going anyways. Right? So this idea of resilience and and to keep going anyways even though the obstacles are getting enormous, I think inspires that begrudging admiration. None of this is a moral evaluation and no one cares what I think what what's good or bad on a on a sort of personal moral level but on a narrative level I think it's absolutely fascinating that you have someone willing to step out on such limbs all the time >> is that also just fighting death >> everything is in some ways a death project right yeah absolutely who who feels that creativity the art of creating negates death and therefore is the the the the purest expression of a battle against the inevitable able and Tolken has this famous clip on YouTube that think all stories are about death and I think he's absolutely right because it's the ultimate stakes uh and it's the stakes everyone lives with every day and we get up and do things anyways >> go deeper on that so we all have to die and therefore a certain kind of story is appealing >> well I think it has to do with um a perceived power differential right that we're completely powerless in the face of death at least for now and that is a fantasy to require more power and then because we have this capacity to imagine the future. Um, and we can imagine really much anything. Um, we have an ability to create our own cherished outcome. They're overcoming this this weakness with the power fantasy. Right?

So, um, Robert Town, who was a great screenwriter and wrote um, Chinatown and he recently died, but a wonderful life and a wonderful career. He said this to me at lunch years ago when I was a young executive. He

said, "Stories are either um desires fulfilled or anxieties purged." I think he's right. >> You know, these are great minds who've made great films. It's never left me. I think I think it has to do with overcoming the basic human condition.

>> I want you to expand on each of those two. Anxiety purged or fantasy fulfilled. That these are the two fundamental kinds of stories. Um is it important that people know which one they're in? >> We experience both desire and fear, right? It's not just one or the other. The hero's journey is very often a desire to rise in the world. It's a desire to fulfill one's potential in the world. An anxiety or a fear purged is an idea of an inherent fear of something that might happen to you that you really don't wish to happen. And it feels good to see a version of the world play out where that which you're afraid of actually doesn't happen because you have had agency in defeating it. This is always really important. So story is character and action, right? Things don't happen to you. It's you act against obstacles and as you do require knowledge and with knowledge comes power to then effect the outcome. It's also interesting to say uh to see that this is never done alone, right? So, so you they're always surrogates, people who give you knowledge and people who aid you in the quest. Um, whatever the quest may be.

>> As you begin to process for what makes a great story, making them enjoying them, what elements started to fall out. >> I have an unusual maybe view of this because I don't always think think it needs to be enjoyable. Um I think that's a recent meaning in the last 30 40 years uh phenomenon where where storytelling became entertainment almost exclusively and and I I don't think that's the the genealogy of that space at all. I also think story is has a religious aspect not in the organized uh way necessarily but perhaps in a the way of of of um ultimate concern.

>> Maybe the most common ultimate concern probably by revealed preference uh in the US in the group of people listening to this is money. >> Yeah. >> What do you think about that? >> It's an unbelievably powerful symbol because it has its stores potentiality. >> So the mind can imagine anything. So it's the ultimate story in some sense outside of the greatest story ever told where both all your desires and fantasies can be fulfilled and all your anxieties can be purged to such a degree maybe that the money project is is a is a denial of death project. The more you are aware of that because it it allows itself to be imprinted with any any vision that you want. The more you are aware of it, the the more it gives the illusion that you're not going to have to, you know, leave your consciousness.

>> What is a great story to you? What does that mean? >> I think it's a character starting at an extreme point, going to an extreme point that they cannot imagine at the beginning, but consciously imagine at the beginning, but somehow deep down know that this is where they need to go. Um, and then situations arranged in such a way that the original intent faces bigger and bigger versions of a barrier that is then resolved at the very end to some degree. Most characters that you meet are either underdogs trying to rise or kings who are falling or queens are falling. Right? The biggest people in the world believe they're the underdog.

Right? Because we are again locked into this subjective experience of the world and we are wanting beings. Why is that such an appealing story? Like why is the underdog that succeeds so universally enjoyable? >> Because

everyone views themselves as one, >> right? So So it's this it's this you get access to people when they recognize themselves in what it is you're saying. the human desire to overcome our wretched state, which is there's this kickot uh phrase I always love and and it's that humans are gods who I think I think it has to do with this capable being on this planet that has to die, right? So, so in that sense, all these things are questions of death. love me to evaluate my distillation of great story and like ask you what's missing in in the elements that as I've thought you were I know you were coming to see me so I was thinking about this a lot and I was trying to give myself only three you know three common traits or something just to keep it simple and the things I came up with were originality which we talked a little bit about in terms of dominant worldview versus how you think the world should be hardship and ultimately transformation information as I think about my favorite stories or if I think about the own best versions of my story that I've lived because I know it intimately those three elements have been present and/or dominant in what I view as great stories.

Where do you agree and disagree with those elements? I'm curious. hardship as the barrier um to be overcome is the foundational element of any narrative. I find it very interesting in general that when you look at the history of storytelling how the the the archetype or the if you will the paradigm of what a story is is someone actively overcoming obstacles to achieve something. So I guess some somehow this must correspond to how collectively you see this in Chinese mythology you see it in Indian mythology you you overcome through activity but through intentional action big or small doesn't doesn't mean and it can just be very very small there you bergman is full of interiority there's almost no external action So most of these by the way are internal barriers as well as external barriers.

So so I think that's probably the is a foundational piece the the overcoming of obstacles and the which then becomes in and of itself the reason for doing it right there is no journey to go on without an obstacle. So in that sense I think it's essential originality. I I have this specific view in um because I think very often successful people will I just heard a um an interview with a with a brilliant designer uh and he talked about originality and how it's so important and and and it felt like a status game that people play that when when they do something great that somehow it was entirely original so as to grandise their their achievement. And it's entirely possible that they felt that this was the case. I think very often it's it's much more derivative. And I think we should be much kinder to the notion of derivative. And I think we should understand perhaps that originality is is it's just another form of derivation.

Uh except it's one that perhaps hasn't been done quite in this way before. Everything's been said, right? everything we've just said on this conversation in this conversation has been said before in some way by someone at some point um it just wasn't maybe heard uh or it wasn't said in the right way that one specific person could hear it. I think originality is in the same in the same way. >> Maybe to redefine originality then maybe originality is the wrong word and instead it's like a novel revelation of some constant truth or something like that like a new way to show people uh an old thing. And and so what about transformation?

>> Transformation is interesting because in the Greek poetic sense it it it would be a transformation. It would be the emergence of a new of new insight, a new power which then creates a new kind of version of yourself or of the of the hero self. And then and then um lately I've also added maybe in my mind this this idea of uh of

transcendental insight as enough. You know, um, James Joyce was all about this, the joysian epiphany, the moment where the character accesses a universal truth, a transcendental truth about the world just for a brief moment. Uh, and and and that's the end of it. So even just the recognition, oh, this is how the way things really are, maybe that's enough, too.

>> What have you learned about status and the role that status plays in human behavior? And um, yeah, just more broadly, I know this is a topic that you've thought a lot about. teach us about status a bit. >> I think everything is about status and and um every scene is about status and uh every scene is about a power differential is what we find relentlessly fascinating. Every interaction is is um about status. There's a story about British actor who who knew absolutely everyone in English society and for some reason was unsuccessful at getting what they wanted. And he said when he overplayed his status he would be hated. When he underplayed his status he wouldn't get what he wanted. Everyone liked him but he wouldn't get what he wanted. When he matched status he will get whatever he asked for.

>> How do you define it? What is it? >> It's a sense of accepted superiority visa v another whether it's physical uh um societal or moral. What about just on the on like the very basic level of like the thing you're doing and why >> I'm building a film studio from scratch? >> Yeah. >> With um Mitch Lask as my chairman and and A16Z as my um investor including including Mitch u and Mitch Laskkey is a former partner at Benchmark and comes from the video game world and and Mark and Mark and is obviously a great lover of cinema and has seen absolutely everything. The quest is twofold. Trying to make movies in a very traditional sense that at least for me personally have an aspiration towards some kind of epiphany or some kind of transcendental insight even if it's very brief or maybe show some kind of transformation possible around these philosophical principles.

And then there are two sort of technical components to it. One one being is in how we make things. And again I I very much believe that that um the the nature of artistic expression is in the human intent but technology can help in film making is inherently a technological endeavor because you're representing the world via uh cameras right it's not a you're staging events to make them look as if they were real but they're obviously not. So in that sense it's technologically mediated and always has been. And then the third endeavor was is going to be around distribution but marginally and and We're all three very interested in in whether something can be done on the edges that espouses this 8020 philosophy of well it's going to be very much a movie company. It is very much a movie company um but but maybe has a couple of points in the dominant worldview that it perhaps doesn't quite believe >> uh and wants to substitute something else for it.

>> What have you learned from each of those guys? Both very >> endless talented and absolutely endless both founders. They're both amazingly successful investors. They've done the whole thing. They've done it numerous times and and they're very patient and and and generous, at least at at this stage of the of the game. Um, they both have a a real understanding and passion for the the craft and artistic nature of of um of storytelling. courage, complete comfort with calculated failure. As in, if you know what you're doing, you're trying something, and you know it's a trial balloon, it's totally all right if it goes wrong as long as you really thought about it. And there's a calculated risk as opposed to a random let's see what sticks kind of risk.

Really incredible ability to map out sort of in an imaginary way what could be. Always allowing that you're not seeing something, but really mapping it out. never sort of in a sense where it's it's this or that. It's always it could be all these kinds of things and based on past experience this has really worked right and then sort of branching off of that most I think risk tolerance like it's it's I guess maybe it's a blessing of success right that you just increasingly become tolerant like a sort of calculated risk um which in the in the creative endeavor is a requirement because you're going to fail >> do you think we take enough risk in general as people >> no not on a personal emotional level not on a professional level. Even just being around people who who have a more benevolent attitude towards failure can be extremely helpful. Um because one's own worth is not caught up in in um whether something works or not. Like this is also a huge advantage that the Americans have over the Europeans um where where failure in Europe is so shameful. have tons of reasons for ideas for why this might be and and then America is more forgiving obviously on the margins and sometimes you think oh wow this is a level of heatlessness that perhaps is a little irresponsible but yeah I think risk goes is inherent sort of the end stage of this kind of transformation that you talk about right when you have figured out your ultimate concern you figured out that they're going to be barriers you can kind of name the barriers even um you gain self-knowledge you realize that through action there's power even just in the action itself even though it doesn't actually yield anything immediately. Um and then action begets action which begets courage.

>> I' I'd love to sort of redo an exercise that you've done on me before because I think it's uh translatable for everyone listening. You asked me some question which was something something that rhymed with um what is the what is the version of your story that is so big that it terrifies you? Can you unpack that very powerful question? >> The mind obviously is very good at projecting um into the future and can imagine really really anything. What is possible even emanating from our own subconscious is so much bigger than what the the left hemisphere brain the rational um analytical brain can handle. Uh um so I think there is a there's a fear of the of the bigness of the world and that that fear of the bigness of the world is also reflected in the inner world. You know so much of story is is actually an an inner transformation. Um so when when you have infinite potential in the outer world this potential is probably also inside of you and it's overwhelming. So fear is present but it it's it's a fear of potential. uh um of of all that could be.

>> Do you think fearing greatness is like the ultimate fear? >> I think fearing greatness as long as we define greatness as a manifold um uh of flourishing of of of life. Um so in all its forms, right? Not just a a great engineer or a great company builder. If we believe as I do that that storytelling especially through the course of you know from Gilgamesh all the way to now is thousands of years of storytelling and mythmaking that we we have thoroughly enjoyed people realizing potential in the world right that there is an inner drive um to to reach one's potential there's probably a a fear of of reaching one's own potential um because it might be too big >> what about inner conflict like uh a character who wants two opposing things at the same time.

>> Well, that's the definition of story, right? So great, this is a Faulner quote, but great conflict is the heart and conflict with itself. That's a great story. So you want two conflicting things at the same time. You're afraid and you have you're very invested in your fear and you want you know you you create situations in the original state where you um this investment in your fear pays off and and at the same time there's a there's a part of you mostly subconscious can be conscious that there's a dream of you know greatness if you will and those are absolutely in conflict because the fear wants to dominate and the the greatness wants to uh come out and and

and do its thing and it's it's through the story itself that this gets worked out and I always think this you know the when when someone takes on the position of a leader and how relieved everyone else is not to have to do that people love to just disappear and amass right and be relieved of the burden of individuality but this is possible because someone has a will to power and steps up and says I will do it >> why do you think that is should more people want should we should we all be leaders in some way >> in some I think emphasis in some way I think we have a very narrow definition of leader is business or political leader and then that's sort of the end of it. Um I think actually if you invert that and you just simply say you have a predicate understanding of yourself at that point in time based on reflection and you act according to this predicate understanding as best as you can at that point in time you're already a leader right simply because you're you're guided by a philosophical worldview that feels absolutely true to you at that moment.

back to this exercise of a version of a story that's so big it terrifies you. Sounds like the model is the the just raw potential is so big but the mind can't figure it out. And so the process is figuring out how to get something that's like subconscious out like like let it free. H how do how does one do that? >> Character and action through action. Right? This is the great discovery of the pragmatists which I think is a huge reason for why the American experiment has been so successful is that people do a lot of doing happening. You know, you cannot have a good narrative without an active character. Uh there's no one that sits around and thinks their way through problems. I think it's a combination of having a dominant worldview to fight against, of having a personal worldview to a spouse, all of which can change. um probably won't change all that much, but it can um and a willingness to those voices that perhaps are in the subconscious safely come to the surface uh and see where it goes without having an out a specific outcome in mind. Narrative is fear made conscious and conquer through action. If I go back to the beginning and take everything we've talked about and and ask you again to give a sort of like grand unified theory of everything that you've been searching for, what's your best attempt at that?

>> Is it it's a technology that is able to through consilience so through pulling from all strands of knowledge to communicate an ultimate concern. So an absolute truth in the story universe in such a subjective way in such a way that the individual can understand it on an emotional personal level which is kind of also what philosophy has been trying to do and it's also what religion has been trying to do. So in that sense it's um it's a technology layer of arranging situations and character in such a way that enables this transmission. storytelling is sutical uh and has a form of salvation not the form of salvation a form of salvation maybe the answer to the question am I worthy of love the answer is yes it very often comes back to that on the emotional level um uh and then very often is it safe to die and the answer is in most cases yes >> wise answer both to yes >> because it's better than the alternative >> you mentioned um a guy named Don Rosenthal to me one time.

>> Yes. >> What did he teach you and how did he teach it to you? >> That it's safe to die and that you're worthy of love. >> So, how how did he teach it to you? >> By saying that in in the end, every story is is a metaphor, right? So, you so you want to couch all all these absolute truths revealed in a subjective way in in metaphors that don't spell it out directly, but convey their meaning through um something that's close but not the thing itself.

uh and he he had this wonderful way of repeating back to you the absurdity of your beliefs and laughing at them. So you would be laughing at these absurd constructs that these stories that you've come up with and

believe to be fundamentally true mainly because you hadn't done the work of just saying well what do you really believe right and once you once you do that it's your ultimate concern and it's your bedrock and you can refer back to that at any given time usually every you know five minutes when you have to communicate and make a decision of some kind it gives you enormous confidence.

There's another guy that I really like. This guy John Donahgue talks a lot about Master Eckart, the the German mystic who was on the on the edge of of Christianity because it was really almost emerging into Buddhism. Uh who who had this concept of *galasenhide* which is the the letting go of all intent simply experience the divine nature that's already in you by the pure fact that you're alive. And once you realize that all else is an afterthought, and I think that's probably what Don Rosenthal um communicated to me in a visceral way.

>> I'm going to ask my traditional closing question. What is the kindest thing that anyone's ever done for you?  
>> Um I thought about this. There's so many people that I owe a lot to. I know that it's my wife um who uh married me. I think that probably is the kindest thing. >> Simple as that. Yeah, >> Wolf Gang, I've uh counted on you for so many episodes of trying to figure things out. And you've pointed out several times today that each version of this exercise is deeply personal and you can't abstract it into some perfect formula to have everyone find their way. But I hope we've done uh a decent job of of some breadcrumbs that people can follow in pursuit of their own kind of most interesting version of their story.

Thank you so much for doing this with me. >> Thank you. And thank you for your time. >> Thank you. [Music]