

STORIES ARE THE STUFF OF THE UNIVERSE

The scientists are wrong---the universe is **not** made up of atoms or quarks or mesons. It's made up of stories. *We* are made up of stories. We are born knowing this, and spend a lifetime being brainwashed into thinking otherwise, but our hunger for stories never abates.

In our modern world, the hunger seems to never be filled so we fill ourselves with junk food and then wonder why we're so hungry and malnourished. It's because we've got no stories to fill our hearts. We turn on the TV and hope it will tell us stories. Instead, it sells us stuff we don't need and don't want. We go to the movies, hoping for stories, and often come away with characters that were designed primarily to sell lunch boxes, a plot that wouldn't surprise the family dog, and a theme that could have come out of a fortune cookie. We rent videos to try to fill our emptiness with stories and find that reducing the 40-foot tall characters of the silver screen to ten inches in the den dilutes and trivializes the story.

We try books, but too many people have been conditioned to fear reading. They've been graded on their oral reading, tested on their silent reading, and required to do insipid book reports on every blasted thing they pick up. Kids need time to just browse in the bookstore, just hang out at the library, not rush in and rush out. The saddest thing I ever heard in a bookstore was a mother, whose child was begging for a book to buy, say, "You don't need

that. We have the video at home."

We try reading magazines, and sometimes find a story buried beneath ads and wrapped inside letters to the editor. We turn to newspapers and find "news" but no mythic story, no heroes. We listen incessantly to the radio, hoping to catch a glimpse of story in the stream of chatter; it's like tuning in to Oprah full-time.

We are hardwired, at birth, for story, that's why we have two ears and only one mouth. We are programmed to seek the "once upon a time" and for the mythic quest of the hero. We try to live our lives by the story our families taught us.

I think of our lives as beads on a string with each little bead being a separate story. The story of our high school graduation, our wedding ("it was a storybook wedding"), the story of our divorce, the story of when mother died. Each of these are beads on our individual story-necklaces. In other lands, in other times, kids grew up with hundreds of beads added each year to their story-necklace by sitting around fires in the evenings listening to stories told to adults by other adults. In our world, too often the stories that go onto our kids' necklaces are TV cartoons and made-for-merchandise Hollywood crypto-stories. So often, as a teacher I saw kids who only knew TV characters. They had never been read to, never had books in the home,

never went to the library, never ever went to a bookstore.

In order to fill our children's lives with stories, we have to cut the plug off the TV, turn off the CD-player for weeks on end, and visit the places where stories live: bookstores and libraries. We need to tell our kids about when we were kids, about when OUR parents were kids, about when THEIR parents were kids. We need to tell fairy tales and myths and Bible stories and the Ramayana and poetic epics. The only way to make time and space for stories is to shut off the electronics. I suspect that TV is a very dilute storyteller, about 1000th as powerful as video. And video is 1000th as good as reading aloud. And reading aloud is 1000th as fulfilling as storytelling. So one billion hours of TV equals one hour of storytelling to fill the hungry human heart.

Billions and billions of stories are out there, as Carl Sagan would say. And if you don't believe that the universe is made up of stories, not atoms, tell me what an atom is. You'll say it's waves of certain magnitude or vibration, or particles with certain characteristics, but I can't see it. I can't touch it.. You tell me it exists but you can't prove it. Sounds like a story to me.

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