

## *Primal Religious Plots Go to the Movies*

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### **Classic story types, from *Save the Cat*, by Blake Snyder**

1. **Whydunit:** a mystery; usually some dark secret; not just who but why someone broke the rules; in the best twists, to resolve it, someone has to break their own code to get to the bottom of the mystery.
2. **Monster in the house:** you're trapped; something bad (sin?) is coming; primal commandment: don't get eaten.
3. **Golden fleece:** classic quest, with character development; requires a road, a team or buddy, a prize and an analogous (more valuable) consolation prize (usually self-discovery).
4. **Out of the bottle**
  - a. *Magic relief:* wishes fulfilled; be careful what you wish for; lesson learned about wanting too much.
  - b. *Magic comeuppance:* curses deserved (but schemer learns and is redeemed after sufficient suffering).
5. **Dude with a problem:** ordinary person faces extraordinary circumstances and seemingly insufficient tools for coping; audience feels their pain.
6. **Rites of passage:** person in transition has to realize that it happens to everyone; we need to accept things we cannot control or understand; resisting this lesson makes things worse; the meaning is in the experience.
7. **Buddy love:** my life changed from knowing you (love story, friendship, boy and dog); buddy is a catalyst for changing someone's life; or they start by hating each other, and ultimately both win by surrendering their ego.
8. **The fool triumphant:** ordinary/faulty person/underdog surprises everyone with inherent wisdom, especially the dumbfounded sidekick or the haughty nemesis.
9. **Institutionalized:** a tale of the group and the danger of losing one's identity to it; a breakout character exposes the group as flawed or fraud; question: stay in the group, leave it, destroy it, destroy yourself?
10. **Superhero:** an extraordinary character in an ordinary world; the plight of being misunderstood, and the unfairness of it all that we might fail just because of a seemingly trivial weakness when *we're special*.

### **WELCOME**

From ancient mythology to modern blockbusters, there are storylines that seem to grab us over and over again. Today we're going to consider some parallel plotlines that we can find in religious scriptures, medieval legends and contemporary film...and ask, "Why do these stories 'work' for us humans...why do they endure?"

### **GATHERING SONG**

*Gather the Spirit* #347

## CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Adapted from Connie Barlow, an evangelist of evolution with marvelous resources at [www.thegreatstory.org](http://www.thegreatstory.org)

Summary: I showed the kids a canvas bag about the shape of a human head and asked if they knew what a brain is/does. Then I showed them what was inside our brain [stuffed animals]:

1. Our lizard legacy (brain stem) which doesn't think, but works automatically so that we eat, breathe, pee, have reflexes, make babies....
2. Our furry-little mammal ancestor that developed the ability to bond with others, nurture, connect, and recognize kinship.
3. Our monkey mind, the biggest part of the human brain, which is always trying to figure things out. It has the incredible power to calculate and predict.
4. And our higher porpoise, the front part of our brain that helps us make choices and decide what's important.



Just as each kind of animal is important out in the world, each able to do special things, each part of our brain is important and needs to be developed and taken care of with good food and sleep and exercise and puzzles and play.

And here's an example of how all of those parts of our brain work at the same time: If a new kid comes to your class, your lizard legacy might, without any thinking, jump on him and take a bite. Or, it might reflexively run away. Your furry little mammal ancestor might feel fearful, or it might want to explore the new kid by meeting and playing. Your monkey mind might buzz through all the possible things that could happen, and try to figure out what's going to happen this time. "Hmmm, one time a new kid came and I ate him, and that was yucky. One time I played with a new kid, and that was fun, but then I skinned my knee and that hurt...hmmm... I've got to make a plan..." And at the same time, your higher porpoise will be wondering, out of all these thoughts and feelings and reactions, which are most important? And also wondering: how is the new kid feeling?

**BUF CHOIR**      *Life Calls Us On*

### MESSAGE

At the beginning of time Lord Brahma sat on a banyan leaf floating on the primeval waters.

From his mouth he created speech;

From his mind he created the Vedas (containing history, and guidance);

From his nose came the stars and the sky;

From his eyes came the heaven and the sun;

From his ears, places of worship;

From his hair clouds and rain;

From his beard, lightning, signaling the power of the gods;

From his nails, rocks;  
From his bones, mountains;  
And thus the universe was created.

This is a Hindu creation story. In Hindu tradition, of course, just as in the Book of Genesis there are a variety of creation stories. Within either of these traditions if we were to take any one of the stories literally, or try to force the disparate parts into a single coherent narrative, we would have a mess of contradictions. But taken as pieces of an anthology, each story overflows with potential meaning.

And while many other traditions, religions, and cultures might argue about the differences between their creation stories, and which one is correct, Hindus see no contradiction in there being a multiplicity of stories. It makes sense to them that there are different stories because Hindus see creation playing out over and over —with a creator god, Brahma, the sustainer god Vishnu, and Shiva the destroyer and god of regeneration all playing essential roles in a never ending cycle. In broad outline these stories will always be the same. But in the details every story—just like your story—is new and unique.

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The plot of a typical creation story would fit into to the contemporary movie genre of the whodunit. Though a more apt name might be the Howdunit or Whydunit. Because when we hear or read or watch these stories, we aren't satisfied simply to find out *who* was responsible for this glorious mess of creation, we also want to know *how* it all came to be, and especially we want to understand *why*.

At least that's the argument of Blake Snyder, whose book on screenwriting outlines the primary plot lines that we see throughout contemporary film.

Why do these same storylines appeal to us year after year, and continue to flow out of us in countless variations? Do we somehow *need* these particular stories? We might want to think that our lives are ordered by reason and sophisticated frontal-lobe judgment. But we're fooling ourselves if we think that emotions and baser instincts don't play a role in our perception and behavior. And it's through classic archetypal themes and narratives that we are able to create coherent and useful meaning out of the complex experiences of our lives.

To maintain the integrity of our own minds, and to understand how to live together on this planet, humans seem to need to play out certain primal narratives again and again. So the formulas embedded in our stories are as fundamental to our minds, as are the chemical formulas that shape our bodies.

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Including the "Whydunits," Snyder identifies ten fundamental plotlines that get repeated endlessly in modern movies:

2. Monster in the house
3. Golden fleece
4. Out of the bottle

5. Dude with a problem
6. Rites of passage
7. Buddy love
8. The Fool triumphant
9. Institutionalized
10. Superhero

Let's take a look at each of these now, and ask not only how these broad categories match up with modern film plots, but also whether there are corresponding religious stories for each.

We can't do a comprehensive analysis in the short time we have together today, but my hope is that as you encounter or remember other stories in the days and weeks to come, use the cheat sheet in your order of service to reflect on which archetypal narrative, or combination of narratives, is being played out. If you pay attention, you notice that we are surrounded by stories: in novels and in the newspaper, in songs and photographs, in Facebook memes, and in the dramas played out in your workplace or the family dinner table ... even the stories told in your dreams could very well follow one of these narratives.

Why does that matter? Because if we stop to think about it, we can ask ourselves, before getting sucked in too deep: do I really want to play the role in this drama that I seem to have fallen into?

It may also be interesting to notice which plots catch your awareness most frequently... which plots most attract or intrigue you? What does this say about who you are...and where your mind is?

So then, number one: the Whydunit. This is usually some kind of mystery. A puzzle to solve or a secret to uncover. If we can figure it out or figure out *how* to figure it out, we'll discover something about human nature. And then we'll be faced with questions like: "Do I embody that aspect of human nature?"

Would I have done the same thing if I were in that person's shoes? Can I understand where my enemy is coming from?

There's a line in the book *Ender's Game*: "*In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think it's impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves.*"

In Whydunits we ask: Why do others behave the way they do? Why do I behave the way I do? Why does God or the Universe behave as it do?

We use the higher porpoise part of our brain *to ask* these questions, but the *answers* are often located further down in the reactive reptile section, or further down in the stomach, or further down yet, in the groin. These are stories about what motivates us.

And we find surprising answers in movies like *Citizen Kane*, which probe deep into mysteries of the heart. Religious scriptures, of course, also have creation stories that probe the nature and the motivations of both God and humanity.

A classic religious Whydunit is the story of Job, a man cruelly tested in a silly bet between God and the devil. I've never found the "why" in this story satisfying, and I'm guessing that that's exactly why it's a perennial favorite: we just can't believe this would happen: so we have to look again and again to see if there is some kind of clue in there as to *what it means* when bad things happen to good people.

Story line number 2: Monster in the House. The gist is: something evil is coming to get you; you're trapped; you can run, hide, fight back, but these are all bad options. Life doesn't get any more reptilian than this. Sometimes there's a physical monster, as in *Jurassic Park*, or *Jaws*, or *Alien*. Sometimes it's a metaphorical monster, like lust in *Fatal Attraction*. Sometimes it's self-inflicted, like in *The Village*, where a community intentionally creates its own monster to keep itself in check.

In religious mythology we have Monster in the House stories too. Theseus stuck in a labyrinth with the Minotaur. Or, in the Hebrew Scripture, the story of the army general who prays to Yahweh that if allowed to win this one battle he will sacrifice the first person he sees when he gets home. In his quest for glory he becomes the monster within his own life.

Next we have the Golden Fleece stories. In these, instead of the monster coming to you, you are going out on a quest, seeking something of value. And the monster stands between you and your prize. So you do battle and overcome the beast, but you still don't win the prize. You get something better! The experience of the journey, and the discovery of your inner strength.

*Planes Trains and Automobiles* is a Golden Fleece movie. *Thelma & Louise*, *Rocky*, *Finding Nemo*, and any decent heist movie. These journeys vary in tone, from the comic absurdity of *Little Miss Sunshine*, to the horror of *Apocalypse Now*, to the charm of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Star Wars*.

In religion too we have endless Golden Fleece mythology. In the Christian parable of the prodigal son, the wayward child finds what he was seeking out there by returning home. And in *Dead Man Walking* (which is a movie, but I think we can call it a religious story because it's about a nun) we see another impossible quest that somehow ends in reconciliation.

Up next: Out of the Bottle, which comes in two varieties. First there is "magic relief," where wishes are fulfilled and we learn to be careful what we wish for. On the big screen we see it this

the movie *Big*, in which we find out whether getting older is the answer to all of life's problems (it's not). And in *Cocoon*, where we find out if getting younger is the answer to all of life's problems (it's not). In many religious stories of this genre we are rescued unexpectedly and undeservedly through some Amazing Grace, but then comes the real epiphany: that we can Pay it Forward.

The other kind of Out of the bottle story is about "magical comeuppance." When someone gets the curse they deserve, but they're eventually redeemed. *Groundhog Day* is a classic version of this that I love. And in religion, there's one I don't like so much: the story of Doubting Thomas, where Jesus' disciple is humiliated for his critical thinking.

Then there's Dude with a Problem. The gist is: an ordinary guy facing extraordinary circumstances. In the film *127 hours*, for example, a hiker is trapped alone with his arm under a boulder... until he finally gets desperate enough to cut off his own arm. In *Apollo 13*, some dudes solve their problem by alerting Houston that there is a problem. In the *Perfect Storm*, there is no solution.

We see this archetypal story in the Hebrew scriptures in Moses wandering in the desert for 40 years with a nation of complainers. In the trickster stories of aboriginal cultures we see problems that get addressed by a dude sneaking around it. And in the lives of the saints we see problems simply endured.

OK last one before intermission: Rites of Passage stories. In which we come to realize that we aren't special; we need to accept things in life that we cannot control or understand. Sometimes we have to let go of things we love, and move on. If we rebel along the way, we learn the hard way that resistance is futile. In film we see this in *Ordinary People*, *Gilbert Grape*, and *The Deer Hunter*. In religion we have the Myth of Sisyphus whose story (pushing a boulder up a hill day after day, just to have it roll back down) reminds us that this is probably As Good As It Gets.

## **INTERLUDE**

### *Forgiveness*

## **MESSAGE: THE SEQUEL**

#7 Buddy Love stories are about relationships, and how relationships change us. To make it interesting, it's usually a relationship we don't want, or think we can't have. But somehow we let down our boundaries and we connect. The *Odd Couple*, *ET*, *Harold and Maude*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Brokeback Mountain*, they're all about forbidden or unexpected relationships.

In the Hebrew scriptures it's the covenant between God and Abraham. And the same story told and retold through the voices of the prophets: Repent, oh Israel, come back to Yahweh, who loves you. And there's the Buddy Love parable of the Good Samaritan, in which both the Jew and the Samaritan were changed and made whole when their encounter as strangers was transformed by simple human decency.

#8 The Fool Triumphant stories, in which the underdog comes out on top, and the last is first, just like in The Beatitudes, or the story of David and Goliath. My favorite fool triumphant film is *Life is Beautiful*, a tremendous risk of a story in that it is a comedy about the holocaust that somehow brings me to tears of joy and hope for humanity.

You see this archetype too in all the classic religious martyr stories in which one character gives up their life for another, whether *Godspell* or *Charlotte's Web*.

The Fool Triumphant is also the outline of so many stories of the journey of persecuted religious groups: the Israelites escaping from Egypt, the Mormons crossing the United States, or the persecution of individuals who later emerge as great leaders: Gandhi, Muhammad, Bahauallah of the Baha'i Faith.

#9 Institutionalized is what it sometimes feels like to be part of a group. Not just in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but in your family or mine, in the military or corporate life, or in the mob. These stories can simultaneously honor the group while exposing the danger of losing our identity to the group and its corruptions. These are stories about loyalty, the consequences of staying or leaving, and the ultimate question: are these people crazy, or is it me?

In *Jesus Christ Superstar* we see this story told from the perspective of Judas, who in betraying Jesus is genuinely trying to Do The Right Thing. Because he thinks Jesus has succumbed to the mentality of the zealots who are starting to call him God.

And finally, #10 we have the Superhero plot line. Here we have an extraordinary character thrown into an ordinary world where even her super powers may not be sufficient because she's got some little bitty weakness that makes her vulnerable.

At the movies we see this story not just in the obvious caped crusaders, but also in *A Beautiful Mind*, *V for Vendetta*, and maybe even *Babette's Feast*. In religion we have King David and his sexual weakness for Bathsheba. And Samson of superhuman strength—except when he has his hair cut.

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Like any enduring art or symbolism, religious stories are appreciated and retold when they serve as a coherent framework to articulate the problems of the mind and the heart that cross generations and cultures.

We must somehow *need* these narratives. Perhaps we keep watching, reading, singing, and acting out these same stories, not necessarily because we are spiritually stuck, but simply because it takes time ... and just the right combination of comfort and distress—just the right combination of mammalian cuddling, reptilian reaction, and monkey mind—to enable our higher porpoise to reframe our understanding.

So far I've been implying that stories that are *old* are "religious" and stories using modern media are something other than religious. This is an artificial distinction. There are of course stories that are somewhere in between old and new, like the legends of King Arthur, that certainly have elements of primal mythology. And we have Trekkies, a product of contemporary screenwriting, who could easily become a religion of their own.

Finally, this: The narrator of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes says: "What has been is what will be; there is nothing new under the sun." Is that true? What do you think? Or maybe more to the point for our conversation today: what have you seen?

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

### **BENEDICTION**

Let us go then, in the days ahead, both to enjoy and to utilize the story lines in which we are immersed. May we avoid using them to reinforce our prejudices, and our most primitive reactivity. But rather, may their lessons challenge us to engage with one another and with the mysterious spirit of life, in ways that integrate the full range of our best selves.