

Opening Words:

We often feel powerless given the things happening around us. But we, as humans, have a tool no other creature on the planet has to deal with the feeling of powerlessness. We are able to bear witness. It is a way to tell the world we are paying attention, we have empathy, we care about our brothers and sisters, and we know who the scoundrels are even if we can't do anything substantial about it. Today. But we are telling the world that tomorrow may be a different story.

Yesterday 300,000 or so people bore witness in Chicago, millions more around the country. We sent a message to the Universe. To me the message was this: We can disagree about politics but we need to bear witness that common human decency is more important than politics. A president is, above all, a role model for the nation. The appalling lack of decency in the office now diminishes us all. Notice has been served.

Last fall I gave a talk on the all encompassing importance of narrative in the human experience. The topic has increased in importance as the battle for our national narrative becomes more and more sinister. Today we'll consider the importance of narrative in the sense of self.

As truth becomes a hall of mirrors, examining why we are who we are is necessary. It isn't enough to believe. We have to contemplate why we believe what we believe.

Sermon: The Third Thing

I want you to consider an important question.

Who are you?

In just a moment I am going to have you close your eyes and consider how you would define yourself. Keep track of the thoughts that go through your head.

Here we go. Close your eyes.

OK. Who are you? (take one to two minutes)

The trick of this little exercise is that it is about two things. Who you consider yourself to be, and how you came to that assessment.

What you think of as yourself is for you alone, but what I'm more interested in is how you came to the assessment of who you are.

I have a theory.

We are the story telling animal. This is because a fundamental aspect of the human brain is that it build narratives based on experiences. Our sense of self is inextricably tied to the human compulsion for narrative. Here is a dictionary definition of narrative: a story that connects and explains a carefully selected set of supposedly true events, experiences, or the like, intended to support a particular viewpoint or thesis.

Remember the phrase "supposedly true events"

As you see, as far as the brain is concerned, just having experiences isn't enough. The brain must link them together in a story. Once the experiences form a story, the brain can understand them. After the fact our brain builds a narrative to explain our experiences. That narrative is influenced by our cognitive biases, biases that are built

up over time. The narrative is influenced by our self interests. We are the narrative our brain builds.

Ten short years ago one of the most remarkable developments in human history occurred. I could make an argument that nothing has changed mankind more completely, and more quickly, than the introduction of the smart phone and it's social media apps.

I think we can agree that the most precious thing in life is human relationships. Everyone yearns for human interaction and closeness. A tragedy of modern life is that countless people feel cut off from human interaction. The mad genius of Social media is that it virtualized the idea of human relationships. You may not have many friends in your life, but social media creates a simulacra of human interaction. Feeling lonely? Pick up the smart phone and interact with all of your "friends".

Social media caught on as quickly and completely as any phenomena in human history. Interestingly, many of the brilliant people who created social media were autistic and have trouble with human relationships. The original versions of social media software were designed to help them meet girls. They thought they were inventing a cure for loneliness. But social media was so successful that it inevitably caught the attention of people who figure out how to monetize technology.

Hundreds of millions of people were using social media but it wasn't making money. I will have to simplify what ensued but you'll get the gist of it. On the surface it appears that social media is about interacting with "friends". What is really happening is that data is gathered on human interactions, behavior, interests, and that data is sold to companies and institutions that use that data to direct information back at the user to manipulate their behavior. Originally it was to get you to buy products, but some very clever people realized that the data could be used to mold ideas and beliefs and even voting habits.

For modern mans first million or so years, we built our personal narratives out of our daily experiences. We hunted and gathered and interacted in tribal communities. Our

sense of self was built from working together to increase our chance of survival. As such a huge part of a personal narrative was trust and empathy and collaboration and humor - all qualities that made the tribal structure work effectively. What you saw as you was a narrative built on actual experiences. Things you had seen and felt and touched and smelled and heard built the world of you.

At some point story telling evolved. Folks sat around the campfire and told stories, and embellished those stories and the best stories were repeated and became part of the tribal narrative, the tribal mythos. Those stories could also become part of personal narrative and for the first time what made you you was not something you actually experienced, but rather a virtual part of your experience.

Eventually books were introduced and then magazines and movies and radios and TVs and computers and smart phones and social media and now there are countless ways to have virtual experiences.

Which lead me to one of the most remarkable facts I've ever run across. A researcher recently noted that the daily experiences of an average person at this point in history are more than 50% virtual. Imagine that. Over half of human experience is essentially make believe.

Yet the apparatus for our sense of self still take daily experiences and builds a narrative that defines us. We are now defining ourself with make believe experiences.

TV, radio, movies, web information, social media, books, magazines, all have one thing in common. They all exist only when a person or group of people create them. They are content. And the bottom line is that they are going into your head and someone with some kind of agenda has created them. The agenda might be entertainment, or information dissemination, or amusement. They might be benign. Or they might be malignant.

Our ancestors were created by their own experiences. We aren't just not created by our own experiences, we are created by people with agendas. People who don't

incorporate decency or simple human goodness into their agendas. Their thing is money and power. They have no problem subverting the sacred qualities of self.

In the last election powerful forces realized that TV and radio and even web sites weren't the key to winning. They realized that mining and using data from social media was the key to winning. Facebook data could provide geographically specific data points that could massage a few thousand voters and swing an election. It worked. People obliviously posting pictures of their cats and their breakfast allowed their narrative of self to be hijacked, manipulated and exploited. It was a historic moment in time. A Trojan horse in the form of a technology that leverages loneliness gave the levers of government to a unholy coalition of power and money mad cynics.

We have even learned who the people were that were ahead of the curve on surreptitiously using social media data to manipulate the populace. A billionaire couple with the surname Mercer, who not coincidentally finance the white supremacist leaning Breitbart News, are principles in a firm called Cambridge Analytica. Brainiac programmers and data analysts at Cambridge Analytica use the pinpoint application of data from sources like Facebook to manipulate elections. They were involved in the shocking success of the Brexit movement in England. They use technology to make people think they are having an idea, and idea that supports their sense of self, when in fact the ideas in their head were placed there by people with a massive financial interest in things like GOP winning and election and billionaires having less regulation on their businesses in Great Britain.

Another powerful entity, the Russian government, also has spent enormous resources on leveraging social media. They plant memes to nurture the worst qualities of the American people and mine data to pinpoint where best to plant memes. They are suddenly a major force in the sense of self Americans develop.

Research show the sense of self we build in narrative form in our head is usually rooted in our sense of ethics and morality. We want to see a good and decent person in the mirror.

Corporations, like say Cambridge Analytica, don't have a sense of self, nor a sense of morality, nor a sense of doing good. They exist to make money.

The conservative Supreme Court of the United States has applied a concept to corporations called corporate personhood. In the eyes of the law they have the rights of a living breathing human being.

The apparatus that makes us who we are has been hijacked. We can now be made to have our personal identity, our personal sense of self, hijacked by a corporation or institution. Not coincidentally their greatest successes are with people with a predisposition toward racism and bigotry.

You begin to understand how 30% of America can think that a misogynist, racist, xenophobic, bullying conman should control the levers of government.

I had you think about who you are and how you got that way. We believe that humans, possessors of free will, determine who we become as people. We determine our identity. For a million years or so, that was a safe presumption. As I've tried to show, it may no longer be a safe presumption.

A few years ago an unremarkable thing happened, a thing that in retrospect is entirely understandable. The people who created social media apps and smart phones transitioned from driven, 18 hour work day, millionaire and billionaire technologists - to parents. As parents they are seeing the world differently. Much, much differently.

The former Facebook president Sean Parker [warned in November](#) that its platform "literally changes your relationship with society, with each other ... God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains."

A professor of media studies at the University of Virginia who is writing a book about Facebook noted that "Social media scholars have been warning about the fact that Facebook has been hijacked by hateful groups, violent groups, authoritarian leaders

for years. It's just that very few people have been paying attention. It doesn't take a huge intellectual leap to be a Facebook critic these days."

A former Facebook executive did not exactly mince his words. "The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works, No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth ... So we are in a really bad state of affairs right now, in my opinion."

A growing chorus of [disenchanted techies](#), including the Facebook engineer who invented the Like button, the former Google ethicist Tristan Harris, and designers who worked on Twitter are beginning to be critical of their creations.

"I wake up in cold sweats every so often thinking: what did we bring to the world?" said Tony Fadell, the founder of Nest and one of the key architects of the iPod, "Did we really bring a nuclear bomb with information that can - like we see with fake news - blow up people's brains and reprogram them?"

Why does The Modern Prometheus, Frankenstein, come to mind as I read these quotes?

Social media was ostensibly created to combat modern man's existential conundrum - loneliness and disconnection. By creating a simulation of friendship that was then monetized by subverting it's intentions, a monster has been let loose. Like Dr. Frankenstein, even it's creators are fearful that the monster's powers have gotten away from us. Social media no longer exists to create connectivity, if it ever was. It exists to manipulate you and direct money into someone else pocket, a pocket that already has more money in it than can be spent in a thousand lifetimes. Under the pretext of human connectivity it is instead about money and power. Something vital is missing from the world view our current money obsessed leadership is trying to impose on our once idealistic nation.

The human race is blessed with a history of great thinkers. We are able to consider the present by reflecting on their insights. Plato lived almost 2500 years ago, yet he displayed wisdom and insight that shames our current leaders.

Plato made the claim that perception and the perceptible realm are deficient. In his analogy of the Sun Plato said that "even if a person's eyes are capable of sight, and he's trying to use it, and what he's trying to look at is coloured, the sight will see nothing and the colours will remain unseen, unless there is also present an extra third thing which is made specifically for this purpose. The third thing Plato is talking about is light. Through this analogy he equates that which gives us natural light, the sun, as the source of goodness in this world.

In other words, Plato is saying that the true nature of reality cannot be comprehended by the ordinary senses. Thus, we should make use of the mind rather than the sensory organs to better understand the higher truths of the universe. The mind, much like sight, requires a "third thing" to function properly, and that third thing is Plato's idea of "goodness". He likens a mind without goodness to sight without light; one cannot operate at peak efficiency without the other.

As our world is more and more engulfed in virtual experiences, as life becomes more and more illusory, we must consider Plato's words. We have to examine how we see the world by using our minds. We have to consider not just what we are but how we became what we are. And everything we experience is a delusion unless goodness is part of the self we create from our experiences.

The agenda driven virtual world that is being created for us does not embrace goodness. It embraces money and power. We are in the age of meta manipulation. We are manipulating ourselves by creating a self of scoundrels making.

Don't let your sense of self be hijacked by make believe experiences. Seek out actual human interaction, actual human experiences, and be wary of simulations that are Trojan Horses, phenomena that not only subvert the human experience, but also subvert the creation of self. Be aware of technology's subversive powers and make

darn sure that much more than 50% of your day is actual rather than virtual experience. Build a you that is real, not an automaton that is programmed by some scoundrel's agenda.

Build a you that incorporates the 3rd Thing. Goodness.