What All Good Stories Have In Common

Brian McDonald calls it "The Golden Theme," and it's critical to telling more resonant stories.

The Wizard of Oz. Jaws. The Godfather. When I think about these three classic movies, I recall three very different stories. When screenwriting teacher and storytelling guru Brian McDonald thinks about them, he keeps getting one message.

Ridiculous, I think to myself. How can stories about a child lost in a fantastical land, a Mafia family in the 1970s, and a remorseless killer shark deliver the same message? Look deeper, says McDonald.

Which I do, and upon further inspection, I'll admit that the stories all touch on something fundamental to the human condition. *The Wizard of Oz*, despite its fairy tale setting, offers the practical lesson that the things we seek are often inside us all along. *The Godfather*, at its heart, is the story of a son who wants to earn his father's respect. And *Jaws* reminds us that as far as we've come from our caveman days, we're still strongly motivated by the desire *not* to be eaten.

So while I'll concede these themes make the stories broadly relatable (and help explain each movie's enduring appeal), I still fail to see a single theme running through all three. Look *even* deeper, says McDonald. Within all stories, he asserts in his new book, *The Golden Theme*, is one over-arching message: *we are all the same*. Like Dorothy, we are all seekers. Like Michael Corleone, we are all children looking for a parent's approval. Like police chief Martin Brody, we must all face our fears.

In fact, writes McDonald, "Stories could not work if the Golden Theme were not true. It is our ability to imagine

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ourselves in story circumstances that makes stories work." Put another way, if you could *not* identify in any way with anyone in a story, you would probably ignore the story. And if others felt the same way, eventually the story would be forgotten and disappear. The Golden Theme, in short, keeps stories alive.

Putting The Golden Theme to Work

For storytellers in the public interest sector, McDonald's discovery of the Golden Theme may seem like old news. After all, haven't we been telling stories about homeless people, disadvantaged youth, autistic children, and others in need precisely to remind audiences that we are all the same? Maybe so, but after reading McDonald's book, I realized that the way we tell our stories may not be reflecting the Golden Theme as purely as it could.

Consider, for example, the story of a homeless person we'll call Ted. When we first meet Ted, he is on the street, unemployed and in poor health, both physically and mentally. Through the diligent work of a nonprofit agency, Ted will be placed in permanent supportive housing where he will find not only a roof over his head, but an array of services that will ultimately help him break the cycle of homelessness.

Brian McDonald

Now consider a different version of this story, one in which we meet a stock room clerk named Ted. He is shy, almost painfully so, but he's diligent about his work and is well liked even if he mostly keeps to himself, voraciously reading comic books during lunch and breaks. When the recession hits, Ted is laid off, can't find another job despite submitting dozens of applications, and eventually can't afford his tiny apartment. Faced with the numerous challenges of surviving on the street, Ted's shyness reveals itself to be a deeper emotional problem and he spirals downward.

As in the first version, Ted will ultimately connect with a nonprofit agency that will help him turn his life around, so both stories will arrive at the same happy ending. But the stories *begin* differently, and it is a crucial difference when you consider the Golden Theme. The first version introduces a homeless person, leading with the characteristics that make Ted different from the audience. The second version introduces a person who is shy, a hard worker, loves comics, and is persistent. In short, *he is a person like us*, and the fact that he eventually becomes homeless is all the more compelling because we can identify with him.

So the next time you tell a story about your work, remember that there are no autistic children, no disadvantaged youth, no disenfranchised senior citizens. There are only people, just like us, who face challenges that we must work together to overcome. This is not political correctness. This is the Golden Theme at work where it is needed most.
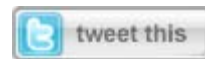
(You can read The Golden Theme online by clicking here. To purchase a paperback copy, click here.)

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Beth Drews Scholarships Announced

Fifteen recipients have been named, but five places still remain for 2011.

To honor the memory of Goodman Center co-founder Elizabeth Fair Drews, we announced the Beth Drews Scholarships in October. Under this new program, twenty people from the nonprofit community will be awarded full tuition to the classes of their choice offered by The Goodman Center in 2011. We are proud to announce the first fifteen recipients:

- Beth Bronfield, Collingswood Public Library
- Nick Carter, CCTV Center for Media & Democracy
- Maia Enzer, Sustainable Northwest
- Jennifer Gennari, Greenbelt Alliance
- Barbara Lefler, The Myasthenia Gravis Association of Western PA
- Katya Matanovic, Pomegranate Center
- Chris Miller, Akron Digital Media Center
- Anna Kristina Moore, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy
- Terri Mueller, Greater Kansas City LISC
- Rebecca Rauber, ACLU of San Diego & Imperial Counties
- Jesslyn Shields, Georgia River Network
- Peggy Slater, Good Shepherd Children & Family Services
- Dean Svoboda, Autism Aspergers Friendship Society
- Rebecca Terrell, Memphis Center for Reproductive Health
- Kathryn Wilds, Lancaster Area Literacy Cooperative

We will continue to accept nominations through December 31, and we will announce the final five recipients in January 2011. Please note that nominations for scholarships must come from foundations. If you are a grantmaker and know of a nonprofiteer who would benefit from a Goodman Center class, we hope you will send the name our way. And if you work at a nonprofit, we encourage you to discuss this new opportunity with your colleagues at foundations so they can put your name forward.

To learn more about the scholarships and to download nomination forms, just click here.

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New Year, New Stories To Tell

And what better way to sharpen your storytelling skills than with our most popular online course?

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative returns in January to help you relocate your inner storyteller. In four hours (spread over four successive weeks), we'll focus on the structure and qualities of good stories and explain how you can apply

them in advocacy, fundraising, recruiting and other aspects of your work. And, as just discussed above, you can now evaluate your stories to ensure they are reflecting the Golden Theme and resonating with all audiences.

Classes will be held on January 7, 14, 21, and 28 from 9-10a PT each day. Tuition is $500 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To find out more and reserve your space, click here.

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