



# free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



## Lessons from Storytelling's Dark Side

If you want to become a more persuasive storyteller, there's a 2-hour master class currently airing on HBO that I strongly recommend watching. It's entitled "The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley." Wait, you say, isn't that the documentary about Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos, the company that was supposed to revolutionize health care in America? And didn't she ultimately use stories to swindle investors out of hundreds of millions of dollars?

Correct on both counts, but there's much more in those two hours than just a shocking exposé. Look beyond the details of Holmes' meteoric rise and fall and you will find yet another affirmation that stories, more than anything else, have the power to capture hearts and minds, secure significant funding, and even build movements. [Read More](#). *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

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Communications:  
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## Lessons from Storytelling's Dark Side (Continued)

First, let's stipulate that Elizabeth Holmes had a big idea that was appealing on many levels. Blood tests are expensive; nobody likes getting stuck with a big, scary needle; and consequently, we tend to have them once a year at most, which means there may be information in our bloodstream that we are not seeing as soon as we should. In the worst case scenario, that could mean serious diseases would be caught too late and lives (most notably, our own) could end too early. Holmes summed it up beautifully in a line she frequently used to end her talks: "We envision a world in which no one has to say goodbye too soon."

The solution Holmes envisioned was a device, slightly larger than a desktop computer that could perform hundreds of blood tests faster and cheaper than conventional labs. The ability to order blood tests and have faster access to the results would be put in the hands of patients, bringing back a measure of control to millions who felt lost and hopeless in a broken health care system. Who wouldn't want to see this plan succeed?

From the very beginning, Holmes was clear that her mission went well beyond building a company that would change the way blood tests are done. "We like to think of it as a movement," she said in a 2014 TED Talk. And for those in the movement-building business, there is a precise formula for telling stories, one that was first articulated by Marshall Ganz.

"Leadership, especially leadership on behalf of social change, often requires telling...a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now," Marshall Ganz wrote in *Public Narrative, Collective Action and Power*. The *story of self* articulates the values that drive you and explain why you are committed to a particular cause. The *story of us* identifies the values that you share with others, that can unite large groups of people and form powerful movements. And the *story of now* explains why inaction is no longer an option, why we must move forward together now.



Elizabeth Holmes holding a "nanotainer"

In my research for this article, I could not find any direct link between Ganz (who teaches at Harvard) and Holmes (who went to Stanford), but if you look closely at the speeches and interviews she gave while building Theranos into a \$10-billion company, they are noteworthy for how faithfully they follow Ganz's three-story model:

### Story of Self

Elizabeth Holmes' story of self fits the mold of "visionary movement leader" almost too perfectly. Consider these defining moments: When she was just nine years old, she told her parents she wanted to become a billionaire. As a young adult, she lost a beloved uncle to cancer, and because the disease progressed so quickly, she never had a chance to say goodbye. She was a straight-A student and was admitted to Stanford, but since she felt so strongly about her groundbreaking idea, she followed the example of Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg and dropped out at age 19 to pursue her dream. And, oh yes, she was always terrified of blood tests.

### Story of Us

After identifying the values that have shaped her life, Holmes does an excellent job of showing how many of those values are universal. *Nobody* likes to have his or her blood drawn. *We* are *all* victims of a broken health care system with skyrocketing costs and a dizzying sense of lost control. *No one* should have to say goodbye too soon. And in her 2014 TED talk, she takes her story of us and goes all in: "The right to protect the health and well-being of every person, of those we love," Holmes declares, "is a basic human right."

### Story of Now

Holmes used her story of now like a closing argument. Our health care system is broken. People are dying every day whose lives could have been saved if only we had more information. The technology exists to gather that information quickly and cheaply, and it can be as easy to access as visiting your neighborhood pharmacy. The iconic picture of Holmes holding a "nanotainer," the tiny vial that shows

how little blood needs to be drawn for the hundreds of tests her device will perform, says it all - *we have the solution right here*. She might as well be holding a silver bullet.

Elizabeth Holmes' stories of self and now were so compelling, she was able to raise hundreds of millions of dollars and build Theranos into a company that was, at one point, valued at \$10 billion. Investors were so enamored with Holmes, that at least one of them compared her to Beethoven. The problem was that her story of now wasn't true. The technology did not exist, and lab tests were faked to cover up its non-existence while Holmes continued to spin stories of success. In June 2018, a federal grand jury indicted Holmes on nine counts of wire fraud and two counts of conspiracy to commit wire fraud for distributing blood tests with falsified results to consumers. (She is currently out on bail and awaiting trial.)



Elizabeth Holmes is clearly a Star Wars fan: an entire wall in Theranos' office is covered with the Yoda quote, "Do or do not. There is no try." After watching her in "The Inventor," however, I would associate her more with Darth Vader than a Jedi master. Stories, like the force, have incredible power, but how that power is wielded (and to what ends) is up to the storyteller. Holmes went to the dark side with her stories, and while we can still learn from her example, what she has ultimately given us is one more cautionary tale.

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## About Us

*free-range thinking* is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

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