

Belief and the Power of Narrative

Graham Simon
January 31, 2021



At midnight on December 31, 2020, the UK finally parted company with the EU.

After taking negotiations down to the wire, a beaming Boris Johnson, the unkempt UK Prime Minister and optimist extraordinaire, who five years earlier had promised the British people that they could leave the EU and still "have their cake and eat it," declared that he had delivered a very "cakeist" treaty indeed.

The exit was mandated in a referendum in June 2016. The anti-EU faction had orchestrated a well-planned high-profile campaign which included catchy but less than truthful slogans on the sides of buses. Those who wanted to remain part of the EU dithered and presented their case badly. In the end, the "Leavers" won with 52% of the vote against 48% for the "Remainers." Much rancor between the two sides followed.



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Most economic forecasts have predicted a loss of UK GDP as a result of Brexit, ranging from 0.1% to 7.9%, with the official Treasury report coming in at around 6% over the next 15 years. Those who voted to leave tend to believe the lower figures or even outlying forecasts of gains, rather than losses. Those who voted to remain tend to believe the more pessimist numbers.

Regardless, the deed is now done and the probable outcome in five years' time will be that the only things British citizens will notice are: the country is now able to exclude immigrants from Europe (but will probably still need plenty of Europeans to pick its fruit and staff its hospitals); there is more red tape when importing and exporting; and tourists need to keep showing their passports when traveling on the Continent. There is also an outside chance that Northern Ireland will no longer be part of Britain but be reunited with Eire (Southern

Ireland) to become part of the EU again.

The UK was split down the middle with regards to Brexit, but people have managed to pull through without killing each other. As we look across the pond to the U.S., where the nation also seems split down the middle, we are perplexed and concerned at the severity of the divisions. While the fault lines may be different in the UK and U.S., the two situations have a lot in common -- namely the centrality of belief and narrative in stoking divisions.

In the news nowadays in the UK, we hear talk of alternative facts, fake news, fraudulent votes, stolen elections, armed extremists to the left and right, and wonder if the U.S. election could really have been as dodgy as the one that recently took place in Uganda. There, President Yoweri Museveni won a sixth term in office and his main opponent, Bobi Wine, spent 11 days under house arrest.

Personally, I still have faith in democracy and the democratic processes of the "free world," because once I lose trust in these, it is game over. At that point, the Western democracies are no better than Russia, China, and a host of lesser states where popular elections do not exist or where an election outcome is rigged by an incumbent leader, bent on maintaining authority. Power in such nations stems from the ability of the leadership to cower opponents into submission through intimidation or the use of force. They are not nations in which many would voluntarily choose to be born.

Nonetheless, in the West, we are witnessing a very disturbing trend. We have entered a new age of social media where anyone with an opinion or product to promote, good communication skills, a modicum of charisma, and sufficient time and inclination can become an "influencer" of others. Multitudes are consuming information through largely unregulated channels, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Fewer and fewer people now discriminate as to the source or quality of their news. To them, well-established and previously trusted media channels are just several sources among many -- neither more nor less credible. Many simply believe whatever narrative catches their imagination.

Of course, belief in narrative and the use of narrative to exercise power over believers is not a recent phenomenon. Nor is it just confined to politics. Great empires as well as religious and non-religious movements in history have been built on a common narrative and a belief among people that their actions were justified, perhaps even aligned with a greater will. Such convictions have led to much progress, but

also to many atrocities. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Third Reich, the Holocaust, communism, ISIS, and countless genocides happened not only because their perpetrators bought into a shared narrative, but also because they had sufficient conviction to act on their beliefs.

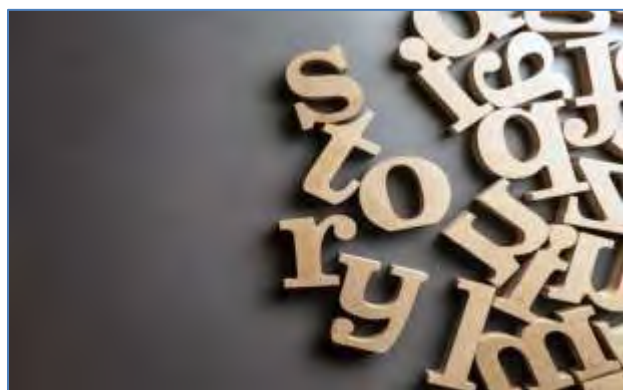
Consider Christianity where the nativity story is known and dramatized around the world each Christmas. At the heart of Christian theology lies a belief in the Immaculate Conception. To non-Christians and perhaps a lot of Christians too, it is an unreasonable and unscientific belief. Yet it is also an unquestionable tenet of faith for many others. It is not just within Christianity that we find narrative playing a central role in shaping people's thoughts and actions. It is present in all religions.

Narrative within the Unification Movement

Unificationism with its vision of "One World under God" is a prime example, to which many readers may relate personally. Central to its teachings is the notion of "Providence." Here, the Creator, a Being of limitless intellect, emotion and will, harbors a plan that can only be brought to fruition in partnership with humankind. Providential history is the record of the successes and failures of inspired men and women in helping to realize this plan.

Within his lifetime, Reverend Sun Myung Moon was central to providential history and its advancement. A recurrent theme was the restoration of the failings of notable biblical figures. To restore these failings, Rev. Moon was required to make almost super-human efforts, without complaint, and to offer his achievements to God. But even then, he could not do it alone. To extend his providential victories beyond himself and his immediate family, he needed people and money who would buy into the narrative, making offerings of their own.

Those of us who heard Rev. Moon talk cannot have failed to have been moved by his vision, passion and singularity of purpose as he tried to motivate a disparate group of followers into aligning themselves with the plans and goals he had set for the movement. Objectively speaking, he produced the narrative and his disciples believed.



These followers often felt they were in the presence of a man who had his finger on the pulse of history. One such moment that left an extraordinarily strong impression was in November 1982 after the death of Brezhnev. At a Sunday gathering, Rev. Moon announced that there had been four Russian leaders of note (Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev) in the 65 years since the beginning of communism in 1917, but before the end of the decade there would be three more in rapid succession and then the Soviet Union would collapse.

For Rev. Moon this was not just a matter of prescience. Within his narrative, he was causal in the collapse of communism. His VOC (Victory Over Communism) and CAUSA programs, his initiative that brought young Russian students to the U.S. in the late 1980s, and his timely 1990 meeting with Gorbachev and were all part of the process. But the collapse of communism was not the final goal in Rev. Moon's mind.

In 1991, he would go to North Korea to meet his nemesis Kim Il Sung, under whose regime he had been imprisoned. Rev. Moon was Jacob, Kim Il Sung was Esau. Through their reconciliation, the two Koreas could be reunited. The Divine Principle could supplant the godless *juche* philosophy. Tragically, from a providential perspective, by the mid-1990s, the possibility of this long-running narrative coming to fruition during Rev. Moon's lifetime had been extinguished. Evidence suggests the prime obstacle was the South Korean government at that time. The providence of restoration as Unificationists had known it came to a halt.

If Korea was less likely to be reunited in Rev. Moon's lifetime, what tangible legacy might he leave behind? A new narrative evolved. After some experimentation, the focus became that of building the Holy City. Ancestor liberation became the primary vehicle for restoration and raising finance. Blessings began to include not just measurable numbers of couples in the physical world, but immeasurable numbers in the spiritual world too. There were theological shifts to support the new narrative. Many members bought into it. Some were lost in the transition.

Perhaps this raises a question in readers' minds as to whether the use of narrative to exercise influence over the behavior and actions of others is justifiable? The simplistic answer might be that it depends on the aims and goals of those who create the narrative and whether they are prepared to take responsibility for the consequences. Rev. Moon was the earthly parent intent on ending the suffering of the Heavenly Parent and guiding humanity along a path to true love and God's blessing. That so many who followed his

direction felt and continue to feel that their lives have been immensely enriched may be all the justification needed.

Attachment to Beliefs

Life-changing narrative does not only occur in the context of politics and religion. We like to think of ourselves as independent agents, choosing the ideas we believe and causes in which we invest our time and resources. The bottom line, though, is our thoughts, feelings and actions are shaped by myriads of narratives imbibed during our lives, starting from the cradle. There are narratives told by our parents, friends, teachers, product marketers, religious leaders, politicians, and others. Over time, we build up opinions and beliefs. These building blocks are integral to our identity. With the opportunities now presented by social media, we may even be inclined to propagate our own narratives in order to shape the lives of others.

Perversely, for those on a spiritual path in search of inner peace and global harmony, many traditions teach of the necessity of loosening our attachments to our own beliefs, opinions and identity, rather than reinforcing them. In the early 1970s, American anthropologist Carlos Castaneda wrote a series of books purportedly about his encounters with a Yaqui Indian sorcerer, Don Juan. In a chapter titled "Erasing Personal History" in his book *Journey to Ixtlan*, Don Juan suggests we should go through life leaving as little as possible of ourselves in other peoples' minds. No doubt, if Don Juan were around today, he would advise that we start by deleting our social media accounts!

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Considering recent events surrounding the U.S. presidential election, we could perhaps all benefit from observing how the narratives people believe, ourselves included, affect one's behavior.

In 1988, I had the privilege of meeting South African writer Leon Louw of the Free Market Foundation. We talked about some of the problems faced by African nations. An important piece of wisdom he imparted was that for African nations to advance, their leaders need to value the constitution and democratic institutions more than they value power itself. This precept has been the bedrock of Western democracy.

Promoting a narrative that undermines it, regardless of how strongly we believe that our candidate is best suited to hold the reins of power, could have perilous consequences.

Graham Simon met the Unification Movement in California in 1981. With a background in economics and IT, he has worked extensively for international corporations in the UK, U.S. and Japan. From 1985-90, he worked for the Global Economic Action Institute in New York, an organization founded by Rev. Moon that brought together leaders in government, finance, business, and academia. Since 1997, his family have lived in London, where he runs a software company.