



Storytelling in Pursuit of Truth: Crisis Communications in the Post-Truth Era

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Introduction and Overview

That post-truth is accorded airtime in public discourse signals a crisis of trust in our institutions. We cannot survive as a coherent community, polity or economy when prejudiced opinions, alternative facts, conspiracy theories and fake news are given credence. As behavioral scientists, leadership educators and executive coaches, we must discern crucial distinctions between leading and lying - and be unambiguous when we work with our clients and students. We are called to defend rationality and reasonableness as personal and professional acts of *civil obedience*.

A leader's duty is to tell the truth. On a normal day, truth-telling may require no more than citing data. But in fraught times and during organizational crises, there is an added dimension: leaders who communicate "just the facts" when their organizations are shocked can leave their followers shaken. Abdicating responsibility to make sense of things opens the door to ground-level interpretations, conspiracy theories and emotional contagion. Whether the challenge is to tell the truth and tell it fast as early responders, or to communicate effectively as executives leading from behind the lines, leaders need to tell stories in order to insert themselves into events, provide context, and express emotion - to make enough meaning so that their followers will follow (Hutson and Johnson, 2016).

Storytelling is not a panacea. Made-up stories that scapegoat, distort, deflect blame or exploit opportunities to gain political advantage, make matters worse. Remember, leaders are held to account if they do not keep their organizations safe in a crisis, whether or not they are actually culpable. Accountability comes with the job. Telling the truth, and harnessing the power of story, is a first step in restoring trust.

So what stories should leaders tell? I attempt an answer by telling a story of leadership storytelling: about a young Muslim American leader who, in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013, was unexpectedly elevated to the role of official spokesperson for Boston's Muslims. His is an account of personal struggle, community hardship and, ultimately, of individual and collective redemption. I offer his story to illustrate effective leadership communications under duress; I evaluate his story based on contemporary communications theory; and I close with implications for those of us with the responsibility to coach and advise leaders in businesses, community organizations and government.



Our story: an authentic leader emerges in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing

Yusufi Vali¹ is the Executive Director of the Islamic Center of Boston, the largest mosque in New England. After the deadly Boston Marathon bombing, Yusufi became spokesperson for the Muslim community:

“The bombers... There was a period of time when we weren’t sure if they were Muslim or not. And on Friday when we found out they were Muslim, everyone in our community felt, ‘Oh God! This again!’ There was anger that some people did this to our city. We had nothing to do with them. And then we realized it was going to continue the same narrative that a lot of people have about Muslims.

I was (at the mosque) in Roxbury - there’s another mosque in Cambridge that the older brother (bomber) was infrequently attending. The problem was that we did not have any trained staff to handle the press, but someone had to respond on behalf of the Cambridge mosque as well as the Cultural Center because the name of the Boston Muslim community would have been hurt if there had been no one to clarify what we were about.”

Yusufi, a thoughtful and spiritual family man, born in India, raised in Kansas City, a Princeton graduate and Marshall Scholar at the London School of Economics, untrained in public relations and unprepared for leadership in a crisis, was asked to speak for the community:

“That decision was made on Friday night. There were two-to-three days when I was doing what I was trying to do. But there was a voice within me saying, ‘What am I doing here? This is not what I signed up for. These guys didn’t come to my cultural center. Why am I being asked to do this, to be the face of PR? What will this mean for my career, and my family?’.

And so I did a combination of things at that time. A very close friend, a board member and part of the spiritual group that meets every Tuesday, kept on saying, “God is calling you to take this on. You have the potential to take this on. There are blessings for taking this on”. Whenever I was hesitant, he would support me. Prayer was also extremely helpful for me. My wife was quite helpful as well in the whole process, although she felt I wasn’t spending any time with her, which was a bit of a problem. I was trying to serve God. God had called me to this position. I realized that God wouldn’t have made this happen if God thought I couldn’t deal with this.”

That was when a shift occurred for Yusufi:

“The best way I can describe it is having a conversation with myself and getting answers back from my other self. What I remember about it is that it was just one of those moments when you are by yourself and not thinking about anything else. And then I got clarity.”

And he made a discovery:

“The other thing I learned is pretty profound: the Muslim in the public sphere is perceived as the ‘Other’. When a liberal journalist would call me, they wouldn’t ask me, ‘Hey, did someone in your congregation get hurt? Is there a hero in your congregation?’ Instead, they would ask me, ‘How is the backlash? Is everything OK?’ We were perceived as victims. And then a right-wing journalist would ask, ‘Did these guys come to your mosque?’, insinuating that we were connected. We were perceived as perpetrators. But no one saw us as *part* of the city. That was the challenge. How could we get people to understand that we were part of the city? Previously I had been very comfortable to speak as an ‘Other’. Now I realized we would continue to ‘other ourselves’ from society if we continued to speak of ourselves in these ways.”

Then he understood the story he needed to tell:

“The community narrative that we tried to keep telling was that we are Bostonians first. We tried to tell a narrative of what our institution, our community is really about: teaching and preaching an American Islam, an Islam that’s rooted in compassion, that’s rooted in commitment to our community, commitment to America. We continue to tell that story, in creative ways: that we have a food pantry on Saturdays as a way to serve the whole community, that we offer ‘English as a Second Language’ courses. That is the narrative we were trying to share with people, to show that we are part of this community as much as anyone. Even though they wanted us to answer as the ‘Other’, we answered as who we are.”

Yusufi engaged in sense-making on two fronts, for his community and for himself.

“I tell my very American story about coming here as an immigrant and pursuing economic opportunity. I grew up in Lee’s Summit, a suburb of Kansas City, where my ethic of tolerance was shaped. My right to practice my religion was respected and accepted. My experience was quintessentially American. We are practicing that right here, trying to create an integrated vision of Islam in America.”

He learned how to communicate to different audiences:



“When we were among the reporters it was very hard to tell our story because they wanted answers very quickly. So we started spending time one-on-one with reporters and then inviting them into the mosque to share who we are. There we would begin to see a change in their attitudes and understandings. It was still an uphill challenge because of the stereotypes that existed. But one reporter from *The Boston Globe* spent weeks and then months with us. She got to know us, and now she always reports on us like any other Boston congregation. In any reports she has written on our leaders, she highlights their narratives.”

Yusufi discovered resilience and found courage:

“The media circus was crazy - a hundred reporters showing up at the Cambridge mosque... Now I'm increasingly interested in putting myself in risky situations so I can learn. No matter how bad things get, I can deal with it. I don't think I could have said that before. And I think that I learned a lot about how to handle the media in the process as well.”

When considering the topic of leadership under duress, Yusufi had thoughts about storytelling, stories, and audiences:

“In a crisis, it's hard for people to get to know you fully just because you are under attack, and you are in a defensive position until the crisis subsides. Then you have the opportunity to tell your story. You have to construct a narrative but be very genuine and transparent and authentic about it.

As an example, several Jewish leaders have asked us, ‘Is your community connected to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt?’. In the past, we would have said, ‘No, absolutely not!’. Now our imam and I explain, ‘Here's the reality: a lot of the folks who initially came here to America from Egypt were connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, because that's 25% of Egyptian society. They learned activism back home and they started doing activism here, and they built the initial institutions here. As they became more a part of American society, they gradually realized that the way the Muslim Brotherhood operated was problematic. Those affiliations started to dissolve. But that doesn't mean that people don't have family. It doesn't mean they are living out the perfect agenda here’.

That is being open and saying, ‘Here's how it has evolved’, and then saying, ‘You know, this is 100% accurate’. As we have answered questions like these, it has opened up new possibilities. Our listeners have appreciated that kind of transparency.”

And finally, there is re-shaping the relationship with listeners:

“Usually I try to be very calm and passionate, and very genuine and sincere. The passion for this work comes across because I love this work. I feel we are in a historic place in the Muslim community where we are pioneering what a mosque-space in America can and should look like. But I will tell you that there is also a deep-seated anger that exists in me, because I hate having to answer questions about extremism and terrorism. It's not fair. More recently, I have begun to share that emotion with people. I will say, ‘I appreciate what you are asking, but a lot of this is just wasting time, as I have explained. We need to have strong institutions that communicate positive messages in robust ways. And you should want me to use my time effectively towards achieving that’.”

Yusufi has laid out a counter-narrative for an Islam “that's rooted in compassion, that's rooted in commitment to our community, commitment to America”. He courted individual reporters and welcomed them into the lives of his congregants so they could fully understand the situation. He emphasized the Cultural Center's neighborhood outreach: food pantries and ESL courses. Yusufi's intention was to tell a new and broader story about his community, one that incorporated healing, unity and a higher purpose:

“We are telling a story that demonstrates that we are a growing community. We are going to mess up at times. We need you to know that there is nothing evil going on here. In our group we sometimes do things that aren't very strategic and don't make sense. Help us figure this out.”

Helping leaders to tell good stories: some guide posts

As coaches and leadership counselors, we need to understand how to coax leaders to communicate in story-forms. For many leaders (and their coaches), storytelling is considered ‘un-leaderlike’ - perhaps an act of self-indulgence, a potential legal liability, or a foolish display of vulnerability. Yiannis Gabriel (2004) has observed that organizations are not natural storytelling communities. As Yusufi's story illustrates, leaders have the potential to build meaning within institutions, communities, and disciplines, through narratives.

Walter Fisher's theory of narrative rationality provides a lens through which leadership coaches can decode the stories of their clients and construct compelling and positive narratives (1989). He posits that all forms of human communication are really stories; some stories are superior to others because of their essential humanity. Stories are the basis of decisions and actions, and so stories



matter. Will audiences be taken in by stories that prop up privilege and defend dominance, or will they be inspired by stories that promote justice, and that honor the dignity of the individual?

The two principles of Fisher's 'rhetorical logic' are *coherence* and *fidelity*. His definitions are nontechnical and intuitive. The test of *coherence* is whether a story 'hangs together'. Is it internally consistent and believable? Does it leave out important facts or relevant counter-arguments? And does it fit predictably with the storyteller's character?

Fidelity means being true to truth as we know it. For Fisher, truth is discernible by citizens and is not necessarily reliant upon expert testimony. Are the story's facts really facts, or are they 'alternative'? Are some facts being taken out of context? Is the reasoning sound? And then there is a 'transcendent' question: are the story's values and reasons faithful to "an ideal basis for human conduct"? (p. 194).

Effective coaching involves translating the story being told and, if we employ Fisher's lens, examining it according to the twin criteria of coherence and fidelity. The story's dramatic structure is therefore a secondary consideration. David Boje (2006) summarizes storytelling research in this way: "Story performances in organizations rarely exhibit complete, coherent plots with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Stories are told tersely, in fragments" (p. 218).

Deconstructing the good story

Using Fisher's framework, we might better understand Yusufi's story as follows:

- Is the story in character with the teller? (Coherence)

Yusufi's story is his journey as a hero. He was called to step into a role for which he was unprepared, and he was at first very reluctant. The job as public persona for a community under global scrutiny in a charged moment, was not an obvious fit for a modest Indian-American community organizer and academic. He prayed, he listened to his elders, he sought advice from his wife - suffering through (in the words of St John of the Cross) "a dark night of the soul" - and finally, he obeyed an internal voice that encouraged him to be dutiful. Story and teller are consistent.

- Does the story fit the circumstance? (Coherence)

Yusufi's recognition of the process of 'othering' is at the center of his story - as it was (and is) the central narrative about Muslims in America. He realized what was happening in the public forum as reporters' questions from the political left and right revealed themes of Victim and Conspirator respectively, rather than a balanced treatment of

the congregation. Most telling, Yusufi recognized his pattern of falling prey to the dominant narrative about Muslims: he caught himself, and he went to work telling a different story. The crux of the story matched the moment.

- Does the story build trust in the leader? (Coherence)

Trust in a leader is a function of character, competence and care. Yusufi's story is imbued with openness and authenticity, decency and purpose - markers of integrity and character. How he led reporters to normalize the way they covered stories in the Muslim community is evidence of a new competence in public relations. Above all, Yusufi's story is concerned with the care of others.

- Does the story make meaning out of confusion? (Coherence)

The Marathon, always held on Patriot's Day, is a local holiday in remembrance of the role New Englanders played in the American Revolution, and a high holy day in the civil religion of runners worldwide. The race attracts half a million fans who line the course from suburbs to city center. In 2013, when three spectators were killed and at least 264 others were injured, the city, the region and the world were in shock. Yusufi's leadership in the anguished days after the Marathon is an example of how to make meaning in the face of evil. Without his earnest, humble and transparent presentation, the growing anti-Muslim narrative would not have been challenged.

- Has the story omitted inconvenient facts? (Fidelity)

Yusufi openly discussed sensitive topics concerning the Muslim Brotherhood, questions from the Jewish community, and investigative probes from the FBI. Yusufi did not hide how he felt about having to stand up for the Cambridge mosque, across the Charles River, the occasional home of one of the two bombers.

- Does the story include a range of feelings? (Fidelity)

Yusufi's emotional range is transparent. He felt anger, from frustration to outrage, by being swept into the insidious dynamics of 'othering'. He was fearful and anxious when he was called to be the spokesperson, a role for which he was completely unprepared. He shared in his community's sadness after the horrific events. He felt shame in not being able to counter anti-Muslim narratives in the past. He felt joy when he began to be comfortable with public relations, and he grew in confidence, energy and hope. And throughout, there is his love: compassion and care for his community, and humble respect for those at his side.



- Are the story's conclusions warranted and levelheaded? (Fidelity)

Yusufi situated his predicament within a global and historical context. None of the key forces at play was taken as novel or new - not the reality of anti-Muslim biases in America, not the existence of radical Islamism in the world, and not the presence of competing interests on his doorstep. He exercised patience and commonsense in responding to the situation before the press, and ultimately arrived at a creative set of solutions to communicate with them. Yusufi exhibited probity under duress.

The takeaway: good storytelling befits authentic leadership and redemptive action

Leadership stories have human consequences and, in crises, the consequences are accentuated. The work of a leadership coach in fraught times, as much as anything that might be enumerated in a contractual agreement, is to facilitate the telling of good stories.

In *'The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By'* (2013), Dan McAdams begins by asking about the nature of good people. His answer is that they are people who try to make the world better (p. xi). And what kind of stories do good people tell? They tell stories of redemption, "*deliverance from suffering to a better world*" (ital.in text, p. xiv). In their storytelling, good people are transparent about their suffering: they disclose their emotional pain, they interpret their suffering as yielding positive benefits, and they move on with their lives better equipped to become their best selves.

Yusufi's language of *redemption* is essentially political. His is a story of emancipation, and in America emancipation means moving from slavery to freedom. Here is Yusufi, in solidarity with civil rights leaders whom he admires, being open as he can be about his personal pain, drawing personal strength and resolve from unceasing attempts to 'other' his community, saying, "In a strange way, it's a good time to be alive".

In the aftermath of the Marathon Bombing, and partly as a result of his own and others' effective leadership, Yusufi believes that the Muslim community in Boston has "woken up":

"Being attacked so directly has exposed Islamophobia in an open way and has led to support for the Muslim community, and a number of people in that community saying 'We're going to be more confident and, no, we're not going to just assimilate. We're going to dig into our values more'.

The regular stories (I hear) are about pain... going through airports... people choosing not to travel because they're afraid. And there's

that incident in Oregon [where two people were stabbed to death trying to stop an anti-Muslim rant]... These tests and trials are forcing people to ask 'Who am I?'. It has settled people: OK, we are Muslims and we have something to offer as Muslims. We're not just people who want to be like whatever the dominant culture is; we have a unique voice".

Yusufi is confident about what lies ahead: "It's going to require work. The sense of healing is there, and certainly within our leadership", while remaining realistic: "Developing a language and articulation will take years. And remember, we're a young community".

Everywhere, there are differences among people. For a leader on a journey toward redemption, responding to 'othering' can become an opportunity to establish common ground, to promote healing, and to kindle hope.

Conclusion: how to pursue the truth

Since 2014, I have interviewed Yusufi Vali six times. The experience has been both uplifting and humbling. Yusufi's story of a modest and self-effacing person being called to leadership in a true moment of crisis, of one who reluctantly accepts the mantle of authority, not without suffering, and who then responds in a sublime way, is remarkable not only for the lessons it teaches but also for its moral clarity. In that spirit, and with leadership coaching as my point of reference, I conclude with four observations about storytelling and the pursuit of truth.

Observation 1. Stories matter now more than ever. Facts and data do not constitute a meaningful narrative. "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion, 1979, p. 110). We live in a world where crises occur continually. In crises, the stories we tell and retell have profound effects. And in a crisis, we know and trust the words of Robert Frost (1915): "There is no way out but through".

Observation 2. Good leaders tell redemptive stories, and bad leaders tell coercive stories. Good stories have coherence and fidelity, they tell about the good that can come from the bad, and they offer hope. Bad stories emanate from dark places, and their telling is, in all probability, harmful to others. We know the difference because, as the journalist Roger Scruton (2017) argues, "the idea of truth lurks somewhere in the background... and in the end we all respond to an inner 'reality principle' and will amend any belief when its refutation is staring us in the face" (p. 17).

Observation 3. The Other is amongst us in full force. The Other is a powerful archetype with significant symbolic power to achieve destructive, or generative ends. In the hands of a wily and charismatic



leader entranced by the Other, or a leader willing to weaponize the Other in pursuit of divisiveness, the ramifications for peace and justice are predictably dire. But when the Other is included - psychologically, spiritually and socially - as a partner on a leader's journey, there is hope for all.

Observation 4. The greatest leadership opportunity in a time of crisis is to build a common organizational story that is shared, embellished, repeated and owned by everyone - and is true. Good leadership stories are ultimately measured by proximity to the whole truth. Their purpose is to create and convey organizational meaning with earnestness and authenticity, without being compromised by partial truths, intentional misdirection or outright lies.

When folklorists brag that they never let the truth get in the way of a good story, their definition of a 'good story' is at odds with what is being proposed here. We need to be on the lookout for any story well told. Is it a sales job, an act of self-deception, or an instance of managerial locution scrubbed of its potential for indiscretion or liability? A 'good leadership story', henceforth, must meet a high standard. It must make sense and feel authentic. And it must be moral - ethically grounded in both what is right, by the rules we adhere to, and in what is good, in terms of outcomes we believe will serve our best interests and higher values.

Ultimately, in the words of the ethicist, H. Richard Niebuhr, in *The Responsible Self* (1963), leaders who tell good stories are holding themselves "accountable in nothing less than a universal community" (p. 88). To recast a timeless idiom, it takes the truth to build a village.

BIOGRAPHY

Harry Hutson is a leadership development professional, author, and executive coach. He has served in senior human resources and organizational development roles in four multinational corporations. As an independent contractor, Harry's international clients range across profit, nonprofit, and government sectors. He is a member of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science.

Harry's books include *Navigating an Organizational Crisis: When Leadership Matters Most* (Praeger: 2016), *Putting Hope to Work: Five Principles to Activate Your Organization's Most Powerful Resource* (Praeger: 2006), and *Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations* (Sage: 2005). His articles appear in journals such as Harvard Business Review, OD Practitioner, CEO Magazine, Training, and HR People + Strategy.

Harry earned degrees from Hamilton College, Harvard Divinity School, and Stanford University School of Education. His Ph.D. was granted by Indiana University. For many years, he has served on the board of directors for the New England Center for Children, a leader in research and education in the field of autism. Harry lives in Baltimore, Maryland, and Essex, New York.

NOTE

Yusufi was recommended to me by my friend Barry Dym, coauthor of an earlier book (*Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations*) when I was researching my latest book (*Navigating an Organizational Crisis*). His story - his personal character and discernment - captured me. I saw him as a civil rights leader pursuing a 'third way' like Martin Luther King, an American original.



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