

## [Story is the Peril of Service](#)

By [Jay Michaelson](#)

*Editor's Note:*

*This article is posted together with [a response by Rabbi Sid Schwarz](#). Tell us what you think in the comments section!*

We are creatures of narrative. Our sacred myths, our everyday lives, and our political minds all are built upon stories; narrative is how we organize ourselves as human beings, and it has been this way, it would seem, ever since we became human, tens of thousands of years ago. Narratives are about people – good, bad, and in between – and they imbue a sense of power and moment to our lives. If only Macbeth had chosen differently; if only Moses hadn't struck the rock. These stories, even when tragic, imbue our own decisions with a sense of importance; our decisions, they say, matter. And of course, we don't like to feel powerless in the face of tragedy.

Yet this reliance on narrative misleads us today, in a world of enormous structures, hidden villains, and forces which are not conveyed adequately in tales. If we look for “the human element,” or the human connection, in our concerns about social and environmental justice, we will be looking in the wrong place. And if we really believe that our individual choices, as opposed to collective political will, will make a serious difference, we are deluding ourselves.

This is the peril of service, as contrasted with advocacy: that we may believe that the real causes of our problems, and the real engines of our solution, are human beings in narrative human situations. They are not. What are the greatest humanitarian issues of the last few years? If you think about it for a moment, you'll probably answer the earthquake in Haiti, Hurricane Katrina, the flood in Pakistan, maybe the gulf oil spill. If you're Jewish, you'll think of Darfur; if you're liberal and young, you might think of Palestine. Widening the scope a little bit, you might add some systemic problems like urban poverty, and environmental ones like climate change. All of them, and of course many more, cry out for response: financial support, volunteerism, and taking personal responsibility for action – switch those light-bulbs to fluorescent, recycle those newspapers.

Unfortunately, the number of people killed in the Haiti earthquake is dwarfed by the number who die every year due to inadequate drinking water; AIDS in Africa is also a far more deadly killer than any photogenic tidal wave. The number of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina is nothing compared to the number displaced by urban gentrification and our lack of a real national housing program. Our recourse to narrative causes us to err. In today's world, the silent, systemic killers are the deadliest.

Narrative miscasts the nature of real tragedy. Nameless trends, faceless economic forces – these are the true villains in today’s most pressing dramas, yet they are almost completely unrepresentable on screen. (Syriana and Traffic are two good attempts; their use of multiple, interlocking narratives creates, in a sense, an anti-narrative, and the real villains are multiple, half-aware, and never who they seem to be.)

Take the financial crisis of 2008. The media focused on financier Bernie Madoff. Most of us know that he was a sideshow to the real drama, which involved vast machineries of hyper-capitalism. But these machines were not necessarily helmed by demonic monsters – that, too, is a narrative myth. The problem of huge corporations is not that they are sinister, dastardly conspiracies led by Montgomery Burns-like villains. Nor was the financial crisis caused by CEOs who cheated or by managers who cut corners. Most people who work at corporations are simply trying to do their jobs and make some money.

No – the problem isn’t when corporations go wrong, despite fascinating news stories about greedy individuals. The problem is when they go right. By law, public corporations are required to maximize profit for shareholders – that’s it. Corporations have indeed run amok – again, not because they are run by villains, but because the system itself is, according to the traditional Jewish definition, evil. Our current system of corporate control is yetzer hara by law.

Example: The oil spill in the gulf. Sure, there may have been corners cut here or there, and BP might have done a better job in cleanup. But the reason this spill happened is that the oil well was put there in the first place. Accidents happen, and huge offshore oil rigs are going to have accidents. The rig was there because Big Oil swayed Congress to allow offshore drilling over the objections of environmentalists and community groups. What happened in the Gulf is the direct result of Big Oil’s lobbying, and the Republicans (and local Democrats) who vote accordingly.

Another example? The food/obesity/poison-food crises. Americans are getting sick and fat because they are eating lots of fake products instead of food. Sure, individual choices have a lot to do with that, but it’s hard to ask working people to resist \$1 hamburgers and snacks made of corn syrup. The reason we have a food crisis is that Big Corn and Big Food have swayed Congress to prop up the outrageous corn subsidy and other corporate welfare for huge agricultural companies. What we see on our supermarket shelves is the direct result of Big Food’s lobbying, and the Republicans (and corn-belt Democrats) who vote accordingly.

Or consider the financial crisis. The reason the financial crisis happened is that Big Money swayed Congress that deregulation was some kind of moral imperative, and that the freedom our Founders talked about was the freedom for huge financial corporations to blow bubbles as large as they want. What we see in the wreckage of our financial institutions, and our own IRAs, is the direct result of Big Money’s lobbying, and the Republicans (and handful of Democrats) who vote accordingly.

To look for individual bad apples and black hats in these cases is precisely the wrong kind of religious/moral reasoning. I have no doubt that most of the officers and employees of BP, ADM, and Goldman Sachs are basically good people, doing their jobs. It's irrational not to make money when you can do so, and because of corporate law, it's practically illegal. But even if they exist somewhere, "evildoers" are not the problem. The system itself is the problem.

Not surprisingly, since our bias toward narrative misweights and miscasts the nature of global problems, it misdirects the nature of our response. That new fluorescent light bulb just isn't going to do a whole lot, unless we have legislative action in Washington and meaningful, binding emissions limits ratified in the U.S. and China. Neither will volunteering at the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter, until we address the yawning wealth gap in our country, reinstitute the notion of a true progressive tax code, and get serious about educational opportunity for everyone – and I don't mean Christian "moral education" in tax-funded religious schools, but a real, science-based, reason-based curriculum that prepares tomorrow's computer scientists to think critically and independently.

Of course, it is better to have fluorescent bulbs than not to have them, and it is better to volunteer than not to volunteer. But both have a tendency to delude. Soup kitchens are important, non-partisan, feel-good institutions, but while they will probably always be necessary – some degree of poverty is built in to the structure of capitalism – they are band-aids. Darfur bracelets are nice, but they "raise consciousness" in the opposite direction, away from the deep causes and toward the shallow ones. And while I feel a surge of love for humanity (really, I do) when I learn of mass responses to the catastrophe in Haiti, I wonder if it doesn't come at the expense of applying that emotional energy to systemic, structural problems in our country and elsewhere. Safe drinking water isn't sexy. And the obscene wealth gap in America is not something that will be solved by giving money to the homeless person on the street. The more we think that we're really addressing the cause of that person's misery, we distract ourselves from what the real causes are.

The state of global health, Afghanistan, the environment, economic injustice, and the world financial crisis are not reducible to personal stories. Since service emphasizes the one-on-one and the personal, it tends to take us away from real solutions and toward myths that individual action really will change the world. That sentiment goes well on a t-shirt, but it is factually untrue. What changes the world are massive, collective efforts to fight massive, collective systemic problems. Our crises are big, thick messes, and the more we continue to hunt for black hats, the more we miss the structural factors which are really causing things to happen: the "invisible hands" that have brought our economy to its knees, the quiet inequalities of capital.

When it comes to social justice, there is no story to get – not in the conventional sense of a human narrative with good guys and bad guys. The lack of story is itself the real story.



[Ben Murane](#) ·

Well written, Jay. True evil is banal.