

The Power of a Story

By Jack Torinus

It may seem astonishing that we, as humans, have built a world filled with complex cities and engineering marvels. Yet, the ability to create sophisticated societies is not exclusive to humans. Many organisms demonstrate the same capacity for organized systems throughout the natural world. Take for example the honeybee. While on a much smaller scale, they show a strikingly similar example of community. Each bee fulfills a specific role in a beehive: workers gather nectar, drones ensure the colony's maintenance, and the queen oversees reproduction. Together, they form a tight-knit, self-sufficient community, where every action serves the greater good of the colony. Other species, such as ants and termites, also establish hierarchies and perform collective tasks to thrive. Despite these impressive examples, humans possess something fundamentally different. While other organisms possess the ability to work together and build higher order in society, it is the human need for storytelling, combined with creativity and the ability to imagine – for better or for worse – that defines what it means to be distinctly human. As seen in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks and “The Swimmer” by John Cheever, this is shockingly true.

Going back to the earliest days, humans have always exhibited a strong need for storytelling to find purpose and

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maintain what it means to be human. Stories have long served as a way for people to make sense of the world, connect with others, and navigate the complexities of life. This desire to tell and understand stories is not just a form of entertainment—it is a fundamental part of human identity and survival. We are very first introduced to this idea in Oliver Sacks's piece. His patient, Mr. Thompson, is an elderly man who is suffering from a disease called Korsakov's psychosis, a disorder of the central nervous system characterized by amnesia, deficits in explicit memory, and confabulation. Patients with the disease exist in a perpetual frenzy, constantly creating a false world filled with fictional memories to make up for what is continually being forgotten (Oliver Sacks, 130). As Sacks says, "[f]or such a patient must make himself (and his world) up every moment" (Sacks, 130). Though his mind is broken, Thompson's storytelling instinct remains intact, reflecting the deeply human need to construct narratives—even if they are fictional—so that he can maintain some continuity of self. His identity, though constantly shifting, is preserved through the stories he tells, highlighting how storytelling can serve as a means of survival when memory fails.

As the story progresses, Mr. Thompson introduces himself to the doctor as a butcher and to a taxi driver as the Revd. William Thompson, even identifying himself as an ex-grocer. He can never quite truly find his past, yet he is finding meaning in his life. "The world keeps disappearing, losing meaning, vanishing—and he must seek meaning, make meaning, in a separate way, continuously inventing, throwing bridges of meaning over abysses of meaninglessness" (Sacks, 131). Storytelling and self-deception, while uniquely human traits, are shown to have their limits. When taken to extremes, they can sever one's connection to reality and even to humanity

itself. In Mr. Thompson's case, his relentless need to fabricate narratives to fill the void left by his amnesia reflects a desperate attempt to hold onto his humanity. However, as these stories grow more detached from truth, they begin to isolate him from the shared world of human experience. For Sacks, this raises the unsettling idea that the very traits that define us as humans can, when pushed too far, lead to an "exit from the human world" (Sacks, 110). This exit is not just a loss of connection to others or to reality, but potentially a loss of the soul.

However, towards the end of the story, Mr. Thompson is finally able to find some peace in moments of silence. This moment suggests that when the compulsion to narrate and fabricate is set aside, a different kind of existence becomes possible—one that is less about constructing identity and more about simply being. The silence represents a break from the distinctly human need to impose meaning onto the world through stories. This allows Mr. Thompson to engage with a more elemental, almost primal form of existence. This raises profound questions about what it means to be human: Is storytelling essential to our humanity, or does it at times become a barrier to peace? In Mr. Thompson's case, his retreat from the narrative-driven human world into the quiet of nature suggests that peace may lie not in the endless construction of meaning but in the acceptance of the world as it is. This idea challenges the notion that storytelling is always beneficial, implying instead that its absence might offer a path to a deeper connection with life.

On a similar note, in John Cheever's "The Swimmer," storytelling plays a vital role in the life of Neddy Merrill as he navigates his unraveling reality. We are first introduced to Neddy as a nervous, but seemingly rich character. Neddy sets out on a journey through his neighbors' pools, telling himself

that he is taking a shortcut home by swimming through all his neighbors' pools. Yet as he progresses, it becomes clear that this story is a facade—an attempt to shield himself from the painful truths of his life, such as lost relationships and personal/economic decline. Late in his adventure, when he is passing through the Welchers' pool, it occurs to him that he hasn't gotten an invite to eat there for a long time. "Was his memory failing, or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he has damaged his sense of the truth?" He continues to refuse that it is anything he has done but rather something else. Neddy's insistence on clinging to his heroic narrative, even as the reality around him crumbles, reveals the darker side of storytelling. In his case, he is using it to hide from his collapse and live under a blanket of denial.

Later on, he continues to swim through pools where he eventually arrives at the Biswangers' pool. As he finishes his swim he overhears a glimpse into his old life. "'They went broke overnight—nothing but income—and he showed up drunk on Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars. . . .' She was always talking about money. . . . He dove into the pool, swam its length, and went away." This is yet another example of him living in a false reality believing that nothing had happened in his previous life. A reality defined by denial. He begins to hear something he doesn't want to hear and immediately turns to denial. By diving into the water, not only is he physically escaping his past but hiding from it as well. The water hides all sounds and distorts all images. To him, he is living in his facade of safety while in the water.

Eventually, the story ends with him returning home to an empty, locked house. "He shouted, pounded on the door, tried to force it with his shoulder, and then, looking in the windows, saw the place was empty." The people he meets along the way

subtly indicate that time has passed far more rapidly than Neddy is willing to accept. Yet, instead of adjusting his narrative to reflect the reality of aging, loss, and alienation, Neddy persists in maintaining the illusion that he is still the same youthful, vibrant man he once was. This illustrates how, when faced with uncomfortable truths, humans often resort to storytelling as a way to maintain an illusion of stability. In Neddy's case, the storytelling becomes a trap, isolating him from the reality he needs to face.

Neddy's story can be compared to Mr. Thompson's. While Sacks does not provide Mr. Thompson's backstory, one can imagine a vibrant life before the onset of Korsakoff's psychosis. Perhaps he was a successful butcher or grocer, living a life filled with human connections and routines. This contrast between a life of meaning and a fragmented existence underscores how storytelling helps him cope with losing his former self. Like Neddy, he may have had a pleased, successful life with a family back at home. But, as a result of his alcohol abuse and the onset of his disease, he transitioned into a world where he has nothing but these stories to depend on. He needs to use the stories to hide what he has lost.

Through these two characters, Sacks and Cheever illustrate the essential role of storytelling in the human experience, particularly when the mind becomes dysfunctional or reality feels unbearable. Mr. Thompson's endless confabulations and Neddy Merrill's desperate narrative reveal that storytelling is not just a tool for entertainment or communication, but a critical process for preserving identity and meaning. Even when memory fails and the mind deteriorates, the distinctly human capacity to create stories allows us to reshape and understand ourselves in ways that are

fundamental to being human. When all else collapses, it is this storytelling ability that helps us hold on to who we are.

Another defining aspect of what it means to be human is our extraordinary ability to imagine and create. This capacity for imagination, far beyond mere survival instincts, allows humans to envision possibilities, construct alternative realities, and reshape the world around them. From artistic innovation to problem solving, imagination and creativity are at the core of human progress. Unlike other species, which adapt through instinct or learned behavior, humans actively design and shape their future by imagining what could be. However, creativity can also blur the lines between reality and fiction. In the cases of Mr. Thompson and Neddy, creativity leads to a form of fictionality that causes these individuals to lose touch with the reality around them.

In the case of Mr. Thompson from Sacks's study, creativity and imagination become survival mechanisms in response to cognitive breakdown. His memory is severely impaired due to Korsakoff's syndrome, but what stands out is his mind's ability to constantly create alternate realities to fill the gaps in his perception. While they might seem nonsensical or irrational, they reveal a deeper truth about human nature, when faced with uncertainty, humans instinctively use imagination to make sense of their surroundings. As Mr. Thompson's taxi driver notes, "He seemed to have been everywhere, done everything, met everyone'" (Sacks, 129). In Mr. Thompson's case, this creativity is essential. His mind never stops constructing new realities, showing that the drive to create meaning is fundamental to the human condition. However, this creativity also leads to a constant reimagining of his identity. This prevents him from staying grounded in the truth of his situation. Over time, Thompson's stories become his

reality, leading him further away from the actual world and deeper into his own fictional narrative. This fictionalization is what ultimately erodes his connection to reality. It becomes increasingly clear that his imagination is less an innocent form of creativity and more an elaborate fiction that isolates him from reality.

In the case of Neddy, his imaginative journey represents a unique blend of human creativity and self-deception. His decision to swim through the pools is not just a physical journey but a metaphor for his deeper emotional avoidance. Over time, his disconnection from the truth of his life becomes more evident. We can begin to see the damage of a life shaded by human imagination later on when he is almost out of strength. “When he tried to haul himself up onto the curb, he found that the strength in his arms and shoulders had gone Looking overhead, he saw that the stars had come out What had become of the constellations of midsummer? He began to cry.” By clinging to his fictionalized version of events, Neddy loses touch with the world around him, becoming increasingly disconnected from his own life. Cheever subtly reveals this when Neddy finds himself unable to remember major changes in his neighbors’ lives or the passage of entire seasons. His creativity, once a source of vitality, now acts as a barrier, preventing him from confronting the real challenges he faces. The fiction he creates to protect himself from pain becomes a prison, trapping him in a world of illusions. So, while human imagination and creativity are unique, they can at times cause more harm than good. Neddy refuses to acknowledge the implications of these changes, clinging instead to the narrative of his youthful invincibility, in turn shattering the world as he knows it.

At the core of what it means to be human is our fundamental need for storytelling and imagination. These traits define us, providing the frameworks through which we find purpose and identity. From Mr. Thompson's constant reinvention of reality to Neddy Merrill's imaginative quest through suburban pools, both characters demonstrate the uniquely human drive to create narratives, even in the face of disorienting or painful realities. Stories and imagination help us make sense of the world, especially when our circumstances seem overwhelming or when our minds fail us. It is also important to note that, in both cases, the underlying issue of alcoholism plays a significant role. Mr. Thompson's memory issues, stemming from Korsakoff's syndrome, are directly tied to his history of alcohol abuse, which left him unable to anchor his life in the present. Similarly, Neddy turns to alcohol to enter this world of denial and perception where he can effectively hide from his past. Ultimately, while storytelling and imagination are indispensable parts of the human experience, they must be grounded in truth. If not, they lead to further damage and disconnection from the world around us.

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