The Slow Story Movement  
by Ragunath Padmanabhan

A story that I do not want to sell

Yesterday a friend who’d just returned from a cross country motorcycle expedition shared many stories with us. One of them was about a couple who settled in a tribal hamlet twenty five years ago. And they...

Well, I am not going to tell you the story.

By telling you the story in almost the same manner it was told to me -- fast paced, information packed with one or two punch lines, all within a minute -- I would be doing a disservice to the subject of the story, to myself and to you, the reader/listener.

When I suggested this to my friend, he said that his first version is only a hook (he used to be a radio DJ). Narrated in any other way, he said, it would get boring.

Yeah, boring. That is the underlying fear. Boring would lead to losing the audience. What we learn on the job, we take as a life lesson -- not to tell a story in any other manner than in sound bites.

Listening to him about the couple who settled in a tribal village, I felt like I was listening to an amazing melody by Ilayaraja in fast forward, or like listening to a poem by Pavi sung by a rapper, or like glancing at the Grand Canyon while speeding in a car at 90 miles per hour ... you get the drift.

Everyone is doing it: DJs, VJs, Newsreaders, Reporters, Bloggers, PR reps, Tourists, Neighbors, me and you. But we blame only corporate salespersons and politicians -- sadly, we’ve all become used car salespersons.

It is said that we become the stories that we tell among ourselves. This might have been true before we became salespersons. For a few decades now, we seem to have become numb to the stories that we tell among ourselves. So then stories have become shorter and crisper -- to the length of a tweet. We are so committed to telling a story to the point, and all that finally remains is a dimensionless point.

There is no point in concentrating on a single point. The meaning of a point arises from meandering between the point and its natural circumference. It is within that arena, somewhere, my story becomes yours. Without the arena, the point acquires the characteristics of a bullet (hence we aptly call them bullet points). The bullet point was invented, I suppose, to cut through all the competing attractions and pierce straight into the reader’s mind. Perhaps after entering, it burns a hole and leaves the mind as
quickly.

I have experienced it now many times in the last three years. We have had dozens of visitors to our farm. In wanting to not lose the audience, not leave out any information, not let them assume something incorrect, I used to do my fast paced salesman narration while giving a farm tour. It is as if subconsciously I wanted them to become natural farmers and adopt a sustainable life style -- all before they walked out of our gate. This can never be detected by looking at what I was saying -- but once you look at the pace and the amount of information, you'd know it.

So then, similar to the Slow Food Movement, maybe we need a Slow Story Movement, where more time is allotted to the pauses, the "silent bites" that allow the fiber, flavor, texture, contours, twists and turns, nooks and crannies of the story to be gradually absorbed by the mind and the heart. Habits die hard, you see, so I couldn't help but invent a new phrase that tries to pack a lot of reference.

Not long ago, many stories used to begin with the phrase, "Once upon a time...," thereby expanding the listeners' mind into a vast time and space and inviting them to see through a wide angle lens. The zooming can be done later after a lot of panning. This allows the listener to see and feel the story from a larger context. Finding oneself within the larger context, the listener could see how he is related into the story, can see its relevance to him and at that point, the story becomes his story too. Now he can retell it by infusing it with his own spirit and content. This is how I suppose we became the stories we told ourselves. The campfires we lit from stone-age until recently were totally worth it.

At this moment, I am very tempted to list a number of points (in bullets, of course) that suggest different ideas to initiate a Slow Story Movement. I feel impatient and do not trust that you will have the time to mull over this article, and in your way, at your own pace, become part of the movement. I am not going to give in this time.

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