

**EPISODE 62**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER:** You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[EPISODE]

**[0:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. This is the podcast where we have conversations with individuals who, in some way, shape, or form have made a decision to use themselves to lead, lead change, have impact in the world and things that matter to them. Today is different than most of my other episodes, Geoff, because I have you back for part two of a conversation we started last week. Geoff Mead is back to return and speak to narrative leadership. First of all, Jeff, let's just get you back on board here. Welcome back to the swamp.

**[0:00:54]GM:** Thank you very much, delighted to be back.

**[0:00:56] RT:** I'm going to turn this little piece of work over to one of the things we want to discuss is right out of the gate is to help people understand the distinction between narrative identity, and narrative leadership, and why you position them in this order. We also gave them a little task if they listened to the first episode that they might do between then and now. Why don't I throw it over to you and you go from there?

**[0:01:18] GM:** Surely. If you like, narrative identity is around the stories that shape us. Narrative leadership, one might say is the stories that we're seeking to shape in the world, in our practice, in our organizations, and our societies. Narrative identity, a sense of who we are is fundamental to how we go about trying to shape other stories. There's an intimate relation. I talk about narrative leadership today, and you'll have sort of three main elements.

The first of which is knowing yourself. That's so fundamentally so important, that it felt worthwhile spending a whole session on that area, before we entered into the broader sphere of

narrative leadership. You'll recall that the invitation that we gave our listeners was to think back to a time when they first were aware of themselves as leaders or leading. And suggested that may well be when they were kids, maybe younger than 16.

If I had the chance to tell that moment, the story of that moment to a colleague, or at least to jot down some thoughts about it. But to reflect, perhaps, on what qualities and values were present at that time. What are the qualities that the leader, the young leader was evincing, was showing at that stage? What values are they trying to uphold in that moment? They may well be tacit and embedded in the story. But it's fascinating to see how much weight those have.

I've done this often with leaders and senior roles. Very often, they reconnect with a more – if you like, a more innocent sense of self, a more untutored sense of self, a more natural sense of self of what really matters before the world taught them something they didn't matter. It can be very powerful to do that. If our listeners had the chance to do that, or go back and do that, they'll then have something really tangible against which to kind of test the various propositions and ideas that we're showing today.

**[0:03:04] RT:** Excellent to hear. Let's begin like we did last week. Last week, you brought a quote by Salman Rushdie that sort of launched this into the conversation. Again, you brought a quote here that is relevant to the exploration of narrative leadership. Why don't you go ahead with that, and then we'll get on with it?

**[0:03:19] GM:** Yes. It's from Ben Okri, who's a British-born novelist, with a Nigerian family background. He won the Booker Prize for *The Famished Road* some years ago. He's a great writer of novels, but also a great thinker, and writer about story, and storytelling. I've had the pleasure of meeting him and talking with him. He was the patron of the School of Storytelling, of which I was once a trustee. He says, amongst the many wise things he says about stories is this, "Stories are the secret reservoir of values. Change the stories individuals or nations live by, and you change the individuals and nations themselves." He's not saying for the better or for the worse, it could be either, as we can see in the world around us.

We pay our penny and we make that choice. But he points to something really fundamental, which is that, it's the stories we carry that shape our behavior, and the actions, and decisions in

the world. Which I think is really what where the power of narrative leadership comes from, and the need to understand it.

**[0:04:23] RT:** Yes. When you sent me this quote the other day as we were prepping, I read it and I thought it was great. Then, I found myself later on thinking a little bit more about it and realizing how easy it is to miss the subtlety of the potential an individual can have as impact, as you say, either for the good or for not so good, through a conscious decision to think about their stories, and craft stories that may be beneficial to the thing. I mean, there's really a lot of agency in what he's advocating there. At least it struck me as that, so I don't know if you agree with that or not.

**[0:04:54] GM:** There is, but he's also, notice he's saying, not just the stories we tell but the stories we live by. If we're trying to change the stories we live by, then we need to change the story. We have to understand where they come from and be able to change it, which goes back a little bit to the Salman Rushdie quote about those who are unable to change their story are helpless, they're stuck.

**[0:05:14] RT:** Yes. Okay. Before we get into these specifics of the narrative leadership, let's help people understand this distinction between leadership, and leading. Because you and I've discussed this online and offline. Sharpen that perspective, because it's an important distinction to have going into this work we're going to have.

**[0:05:32] GM:** Yes, I think it is. As I probably mentioned last time, I've been around the leadership development field for a long time. It's taken me many years to realize that I really am not very interested in leadership. It's an abstract noun. It doesn't mean very much in itself. We can load it with whatever we want to put into. It's like an empty suitcase that we can fill. Also, it's a way in which by making it abstract, we cannot be responsible for it.

I've worked in a number organizations where they talk about the leadership, these are people around the organization. But it also is a way of saying, this is not my problem. It's the leadership leads. I think it's very problematic, and it's also rather disempowering. I found that it's much more helpful, and healthy to think of leading. What is it we do when we lead. If we think of

leading as a verb, as an activity, then we can get some more agency to use a word I use last time over how we engage with it.

It both democratizes the process, because it doesn't restrict it to a group of leaders. It actually challenges us to take responsibility wherever we are and whoever in an organization. We can, in a moment, if a particular time, or particular circumstance, we can seek to lead, to influence, to change the course of opinion, change the course of action as things go forward.

In that sense, although I'm a great fan of Keith Grint, and I've talked alongside him a number of times. I rather disagree with his sense that this is about leaders and followers, because that puts people into different categories. I don't think that's necessarily the case. Of course, some people have a nominal leadership role. You can't get away from using the words or figure of speech. Some people have a responsibility to lead, and it's nominal in their job title. But we can all lead, and we can all follow, and you can follow. As the chief executive, you can follow and it may be appropriate for you to do so.

**[0:07:23] RT:** From time to time, yes. I want to amplify, at least I'll throw my perspective in here. You're saying is, but just to sort of be more specific, I think leading is a choice. Sometimes we choose it, and sometimes we don't, I think. Therefore, it can come from, as you just said, anywhere in the system by anybody raising their hand, and choosing to do it with, I would say, an understanding, hopefully, that you can get hurt. It could be challenging; it's not risk free when you make that choice. It comes with some –

**[0:07:51] GM:** No, of course not.

**[0:07:52] RT:** – possible peril. All right. You have a point of view, a definition of leadership you shared with me offline. I wonder if you'd share it with me here with the audience, because I think it gives us a good perspective of where we're headed here.

**[0:08:03] GM:** Well, I would call an element of leading, rather than a definition of leadership. It's one that I've tested often with people in workshops and in organizations. That, I say, what are we doing when we're leading? My proposition is that, perhaps at the core, but certainly a very important part of it is, we are making sense of complex, and difficult situations, and

circumstances, with and sometimes for other people. In that sense, leading is an ongoing mutual process of meaning making. If you like, socially constructed meaning if you want to be philosophical about it, or ontological about it. It's a relational process that we continue to do so.

I virtually had unanimous agreement. People say, "Yes. That is it, I do that. That is what I do." Part of what I do as a leader or when I'm leading is I'm taking a situation and trying to make sense of it with people and for people. Often, it's about the future, about what might happen, or what we might like to happen. I think that people have found that a very empowering way of thinking about leading, and it's not exclusive. There are other things. Of course, there are other things to do with leading. But that's the point of entry, I think for narrative leadership. Because narrative and story is an extremely powerful way of making meaning and making sense.

**[0:09:22] RT:** In complex situations in particular, where there is probably no one person in the room that knows the answer to the challenge.

**[0:09:30] GM:** Yes, absolutely. One of the things I say, and we perhaps get onto this. Now is the moment, but there's a way in which we need to understand what it is, what's the bit that story and narrative does that enables us to make sense of things. Because it's not our only sense making tool. Of course, it is, and it's not the only way we have of communicating.

I talk about a very simple model of communication, which is about information, argument, and story, and they do different things. Understanding what the difference is, and when to you use them, and how to use them in concert, I think it's very powerful.

**[0:10:03] RT:** Well, let's get onto it right here. I mean, you're bringing it up, because I think this is a building block of some of the other stuff we'll talk about, at least partnership with. Draw out some elements of those distinctions you're making, if you would.

**[0:10:16] GM:** Yes. To make this distinction, well, we could talk about it, but why don't we do something? I think we're running a little practice that I often do, which is a sort of going back to the fundamentals of what story does. I often get people in a room, and I asked them in pairs to tell each other all the good reasons why it's a good thing to travel by train. They do that, and

they listen, and they listen. I assume, run out of steam, actually, about 90 seconds I ran a steam. Not really.

Then, I start them in a different modality. I say, "Can you remember a memorably enjoyable train story, a time when you had a train journey that anytime in your life was memorably enjoyable?" Some people look askance because they hate train, and I said, "That's fine. Think of a memorably awful train journey. But think of one, one journey." I get them to tell the story of that train journey to each other, and they're very different experiences. Why don't you challenge me to do that, and you can see what the difference is?

**[0:11:16] RT:** Yes. Tell me all the good reasons. You're an Englishman, so you got train experience.

**[0:11:21] GM:** Yes. We have trains. Yes.

**[0:11:23] RT:** What's the benefits of trains? What's the good things trains do?

**[0:11:26] GM:** Okay. Well, in no particular order, I would say, on a good train journey, you can relax and have a meal as you go. You can have a serious conversation, you can read, and write on a train. You can sleep on a train. It's better for the environment, it's cheaper, less emissions per mile per person. There isn't that hassle of having somewhere to park. You can relax because you're not responsible all the time for where you're going and what you're doing. You may go somewhere where you can really take in the view, which you can't do when you're driving. You could have a meeting on a train, you might meet someone interesting on a train. You're not going to do that driving a car, or maybe in an airplane because it's more social.

What else can I think of? You can plan ahead, you can plan your journey, you know when it's going to be. When the train service is running, you know when it's going to start, when it's going to stop? You're not subject to the vagaries of the motorways clogging up. It's safer. How about that? They're the reasons I can think at the moment.

**[0:12:27] RT:** Most of those, in the United States, you can't pull off on a train.

**[0:12:33] GM:** Yes. I did once ask a room full of senior executives in an American organization to think of a memorable train journey. I was faced with the fact, they said, "We don't do trains." We talked about road trips instead.

**[0:12:45] RT:** Yes. Take us on a memorable train trip that you've been on.

**[0:12:49] GM:** All right. I love trains, I should say. My grandfather was an engine driver in the days of steam, so it's in my blood. But I can certainly remember one wonderful journey that I took with my late wife. We went under the Channel Tunnel, I have a little open two-seater car, and I just got it, and we were going to take it on a trip up the ponies. We got on the motorail in Calais in the evening. We've been to supermarket, hypermarket and we bought some wine, and peaches, and meat, and cheese, and French bread. The car was put onto the motorail.

We found our cabin, a couchette. As the evening kind of grew darker, we had our meal. We were kind of sensing, and tasting what was to come. Then, we put the bunks up, and she'd be younger than me, she climbed up to the top bunk. I slept in the lower bunk. It had wonderful sensation of rattling through the night, rocking, and rattling, and rocking. These night trains, they didn't go fast, they go slow, because they stop at stations to deliver mail, to pick up packages every so often during the night.

It would come to a stop, and we wake up, and Chris would put a hand down from the top, and we just – I'd reach out, and we just touch hands. Then, soon, we'd be asleep. When it got to morning, by that time, it'd traveled right through France, down to a town called Narbonne, just on the south coast. We got out, we had to wait for the cars to be unloaded. As we waited, it was very hot. There was a very elderly couple waiting in the heat. I thought, "My goodness, he didn't have much hair to protect his head." I lent him my hat, and we had a little chat. They were very upper crust, "Yes, we come here every year." As we waited, their vintage Rolls Royce was wheeled off the train for them. They got in. I mean, I don't know that he ever had any other car. It looked he was the same vintage as the car. I remember, Chris and I turn into each other, it's this delightful couple kind of pootled away into the distance saying, "Maybe one day, maybe one day that could be us."

**[0:15:00] RT:** Okay. For the listeners, I can see the distinctions you're making here, between the didactic, descriptive nature, the bullet point list of values of taking the train, and the narrative sort of the song line, and almost the kind of evocative music that goes with it.

**[0:15:18] GM:** I'm imagining that. In relation to the former, you were kind of nodding internally saying, "Yes. No. Maybe. That's probably right." We judge that sort of communication. We run it past our critical thinking faculty, and we should. But the story communication, we say it differently, and we receive it differently. I'm saying, I'm taking a gamble here, and I'm saying, there's a very good chance, as I was talking, you were able to imagine some of those scenes, you're able to see, maybe hear, maybe even taste the wine in a sense.

A story has an amazing capacity to create a vicarious experience of something in a different way. It is very personal. Anyone, pretty much, could have told you the list of good reasons. Only I could have told that story. It's very personal. You learn more about me in my life in the telling of the story, even what I didn't say, you got a glimpse into me. I think it's the truism that when we communicate in that more abstract, generalized way, we always somehow say less than we mean. When we tell a story, we will say more than we know.

There's a way in which, in a story, we are revealing something about ourselves, we're showing up differently. Even a simple personal story by that can be very powerful in making connection. There are things like memorability, the form of the first communication is not innately memorable. I will wager you, that you in a week's time, maybe this afternoon won't remember that list.

**[0:16:43] RT:** Many of them.

**[0:16:44] GM:** No. But I'll wager you, that probably even in a week's time, you might think, "Ah, that journey." There's something about the form, it's innately memorable, it has the capacity to stimulate images, which is image ination. That's what image ination is. It's a kind of vicarious experience of living through senses that our body hasn't known. But our brain kind of reproduces as if they had, we get that. The other thing it does is open up, I'm suggesting to you the emotional bandwidth of a story is wider than the emotional bandwidth of that more formal



communication. I'm guessing you had a different emotional response to the story than you had to the other?

**[0:17:25] RT:** Very much so.

**[0:17:26] GM:** Yes. We have there kind of three elements of communication that I work with: information, argument, and story, and they're different. Information, informs, it purports to give the facts of something. As I say, we run it past that critical thinking. Of course, we do we need to, the numbers need to add up. We make an argument, the logic of something. If this, then that. Again, we check it out. Do we agree? Was that actually a correct logical presumption? Did it follow? Was it a correct deduction? Or, are there different axioms or are there other possibilities? Ye, no, maybe.

Story doesn't do that. You were judging my story by different criteria. Was it interesting? Was it lifeline? Did it engage me. What stories do not uniquely, but in a particularly strong way, is they stimulate the imagination, and they open up the emotional bandwidth? I think in terms of communicating, whether it's, as part of our role in leading or anywhere else, if we want to be really effective in communicating, then we need to understand how those three work together.

**[0:18:26] RT:** Yes. It's just the question I was going to ask you. Say something about – two things I think I want to ask you about that. One is about the integration of those three elements. Maybe, before that, if I'm in a position where I'm going to be having to speak, how do I think about the design of the integration of that. Is their sequence or how do you get at that, so when you got to think to come into the room with that, it does address it from those three angles?

**[0:18:56] GM:** It doesn't always have to. I mean, imagine a slightly different train scenario. Imagine that you're in your car driving to the station, and you don't know where the car park is, and I'm walking on the road. You pull up beside me, you say, "Excuse me. Can you tell me where the car park is for the train station?" Well, if I turn around to you and say, "Do you know what's extraordinary, I should say, my grandfather was an engine driver in the days of steam, and he used to take me under sidings when I was a boy, and we'd look at the steam rise." You don't need or want a story. You want information and you want it now.

Information and argument are very concise, and quick. We can convey a lot of information. So the question is, when do we need a story? Well, what the stories do, they create this vicarious experience. We get a sense of when information and argument are not enough, when we try to communicate something, and our audience kind of understands what we're saying, but they don't get it. You know what I mean? They don't actually get it. It hasn't landed somehow, they can't quite understand what this is all about. That is the time when a story is really helpful.

An example, you can call it an example of something that has happened, or might yet happen in order to give people a different kind of connection with it. And they can say, "Oh, it's like." It doesn't mean I have to agree with you. But if they can't get a sense of our, it's like that, you haven't got the basis for a holistic conversation about it. You can just say, "Well, that's logical, but that doesn't buy me in, or give me the chance to decide whether or not I want to buy in. Not with anything other than my head."

**[0:20:25] RT:** Yes. Is it that part when you're choosing to lead and you're trying to bring people along on some initiative? Is it that part that is causing them to follow, and come, and engage? Or, does it get backed up a little – is backed up with some of the other parts.

**[0:20:43] GM:** It's all three. As I say, the numbers have to add up. If they don't, what's the point? It's illogical if the saying doesn't make sense. I'm not interested in the story. Your foundations have to be there. But it's that bit of communicating a sense of what this actually might be. I think I may have mentioned last time, this notion of storytelling, having an evolutionary advantage. We are the storytelling animal.

Now, Yuval Harari, in his wonderful book, *Sapiens* talks about how perhaps it gave us, as a species, an evolutionary advantage. The fact that we could sit down on the campfire, and say, this morning, "I was at the waterhole, and there was a mammoth there, and one looked at like it was ready to have a calf. I think we could catch that tomorrow." The evolutionary advantage or how to do that, as opposed to having to grab everyone by the hand, take them to the waterhole and point is enormous. We're actually creating an experience of something that isn't present in our minds, our brains through.

We've discovered this through neuroscience in the last decade, the idea of a mirror neuron, that our brains react to a story or seeing something like a film or a play, as if we were there, not fully. The pattern of neuronal activity is very similar in the brain when we're listening to a story, or reading a story, or going to play, or cinema, or something like that, as if we're actually doing it. We know it's not real, but it is real in a way.

**[0:22:04] RT:** It is real. Yes.

**[0:22:04] GM:** We have an experience. We have a vicarious sensory experience of something. Then, we're in a different position to make up our minds about it. Then, we can have a different kind of conversation, which I think is where storytelling as part of narrative leadership fits in. It is, of course, not the only element of narrative leadership. Storytelling, that element, it is a skill, it is a craft. We already innately have a huge amount of tacit knowledge about what it is to tell stories. We do it all the time. But from the craft of storytelling, there are a few key things that people can learn about repertoire, composition, and performance to talk about in artistic terms. That can add a great deal to impact, some simple techniques if you like that can add to impact. But our innate capacity is there, you can't instill that.

I've never met anyone I couldn't help tell a really good story, if they wanted to. I met a handful over the years who didn't want to. The reason for that, I think, my judgment on the situation is that they weren't willing to be vulnerable. Because as we know, in the train story we experience, there is a certain vulnerability. I've let you into a little bit of my life there, which has very poignant memories for me. I've met people who don't want to do that, they're not willing to take the armor plate off, and that's a choice. It's not for me to judge. But I've never met anyone who wants to tell a story, who couldn't tell a really good story with a little bit of effort.

**[0:23:29] RT:** Okay. There's a story I want you to tell in a minute. But before that, I'm interested in getting another element to this end here. Because you, in your modest way, believe that Aristotle missed something.

**[0:23:42] GM:** Yes, I do.

**[0:23:44] RT:** But I think it's relevant, and it fits here. Say a little bit more about how you can upgrade Aristotle's points of view here.

**[0:23:52] GM:** Aristotle 2.1. What Aristotle and other classical authors wrote about rhetoric, that is the art of persuasion, the art of influence, they spoke about three elements. One is logos, that's the quality of the argument that is being made. Another was pathos, that's the feelings that you can engender. The third element is ethos, that's the character and standing of the person who is trying to influence you. Do I believe this person? Do they walk the talk? I think they're absolutely relevant.

I think he missed out on the mythos. Mythos to me is connected with the imagination in particular. I've got pet theory about that, which is, I think, the classical Greeks externalized in their minds. They externalized imagination from their own psyche. They thought that was a gift. It wasn't there as they were touched by the muse, and that's what happened. But whether that's true or not, I don't know. Who am I really to criticize Aristotle?

I think it makes the point that if we think about communicating simply in terms of argument, feeling, and character, we're not quite there. We've taken a long way, but to engage something to sort of get the hook that enables people to begin to experience something, and see something, we need to engage their imaginations.

**[0:25:10] RT:** It strikes me as you're speaking to this dynamic. That great, I'm going to say, movie makers, but in art shows up everywhere. But movie is such a visual, and story aspect, that some of those people that we highly regard, and almost no by default, if, for example, Steven Spielberg has a new movie coming out, we have a pretty good sense that there will be all those elements of play as we ride along for two hours in the conversation. Writers, et cetera have this **[inaudible 0:25:39]**. You probably have more company and thinking Aristotle and Mr. Peace than **[inaudible 0:25:45]**. Maybe a small crowd, I think.

**[0:25:49] GM:** I feel safe, because he's not going to sue me.

**[0:25:53] RT:** All right. Let's make it real, because you told me a story that I was not aware of about, I'm just going to say the post office story, and you can go from here. Because this is a good example of what you're talking about, I think in the real world.

**[0:26:05] GM:** I think it's an extraordinary example, and a real one, a current one in UK. In the post office, and it's not the post office that delivers letters, that's the Royal Mail. The post office are a series of small offices dotted about, and I think there are 1000s of them throughout the country. Where you go and buy your stamps, or you can put your parcel in, or you can have a money order. There are various things, you can do a lot of different transactions. Most of them small scale, financial. An earlier generation would have done some of their banking at the post office, for example.

About 20 odd years ago, post office introduced a new computer system called Horizon. Right from the day one, it was problematic. Sub post masters, or mistresses, or people around these offices were reporting strange accounting results on their system, which they had to balance their books every day. Over the course of about a decade, perhaps a bit longer, hundreds of them were prosecuted for fraud. When I say hundreds, I mean, nearly a thousand were prosecuted for fraud on the basis of a faulty accounting system. It became known, it was known in Parliament, it was known in the public, it was a scandal. A number of these people, relatively, low number of these, 750, I think, who convicted, had their convictions overturned. Nobody believed them. Everyone was told, it's just you. It took years for them to understand that this was a systemic failure.

Everyone in this institution was dragging their feet, everyone agreed it was wrong, but the courts had their time, they had to review each case. There had to be a process for looking at compensation. A drag on, and on, and on, to the point where people were dying before these things were resolved. About three months ago, an independent television production company made I think, a three-part series called, *Mr. Bates vs The Post Office*. This guy, Bates, was one of these people who gathered together other postmasters, or mistresses to fight this problem.

The story was told, and the impact of that story was enormous. It was over all the media within a day or two. It was a hot political topic for the first time, and it having been brushed aside, or dusted over for years and years. Within weeks, a bill was drafted, taken to Parliament to quash

these convictions on mass, recognizing that standard process was too slow, was ineffective, and a huge injustice. They're also doing things to change the way the compensation system is managed. The story did something that all the information that was known about it didn't and couldn't do. I think it's an extraordinary example of the power of narrative. In this case, a power for the good.

**[0:28:40] RT:** Yes. Help people who are unfamiliar with the story what, what happened in the story in the three parts that wasn't happening before for people to say, "Okay. This story happening and producing change." What was that?

**[0:28:55] GM:** Because we saw the characters, we saw the people involved, either represented by actors, of course, but it became real, it became human. This wasn't some abstract thing that we were told about information and arguments. I mean, it was real people represented by actors, really experiencing this suffering. We saw the human stories, there were suicides involved, and this is true. All this would have taken from trip from life, desperate situations where people are bankrupted. You saw them living through this experience and feeling, and you saw their attempts to have something done. You saw the dissembling, you saw the lies, and you saw sort of clumsy footed operation of institutions trying to respond to it.

It became real, and that's what stories do. They make things real? It's one of the many paradoxes of story. That stories are not about making up fanciful things. They're about making things real for us.

**[0:29:51] RT:** All right. I'm going to pick that up in a minute here. But first, you also make this distinction. You pick up this distinction from Jürgen Habermas, about systems world versus life world. I think this is a useful storytelling, understanding its structure.

**[0:30:07] GM:** Yes. We can kind of see it here. In Mr. Bates thing, where you've got the system world trying to respond to it in particular ways, very formulaic. They've got rules, they got procedures, they've got positions of power to protect. Then, you've got the life world, you've got the real lived experience of people in the moment.

Habermas is a Dutch sociologist who talks about the system world and the life world. He says, the system world, that the world of institutions and organizations works from a purpose of, rational purpose of logic. Institutions, and systems are created to achieve certain ends, and they are organized to achieve certain ends. Those ends are prescribed more or less. They may be for profit, they may be for public good, depending on what they're for. But they have certain prescribed ends, and efforts are organized, and we organize our efforts to achieve those goals and ends. But we don't live our lives like that.

The life world is live differently. We live by love, belief, hope, aspiration, community. Habermas' notion is that, in the industrial and post-industrial age, the life world and the system will become disconnected. If you go back before the industrial age, they were deeply integrated. People live their work and work their lives. There was a much closer interconnection. But with specialization of labor, and mass production, you got a separation. There was work and home. I do the work and I kind of – we separate our lives. But, says Habermas, "The influence of a system has grown so much, that it's completely overwhelming the influence of the life world. And it's almost colonized it to the point where we, if we're not careful begin to believe that we need to live our lives in the same way."

Anyway, I find this distinction helpful to remember, because when I go into boardrooms, in the light to work with people, they are operating in system world. They have roles, responsibilities, targets, goals, performance measures, rewards all the rest of it, that lock them in place. What I tried to do is open what Habermas call a communicative space. I'm trying to open that space up to let the Lifeworld in, so that they can meet. I sometimes think that the most important work I do in those particular settings is getting people to tell each other small stories from life, just little things about their lives, just small stories about time that they perhaps overcame a difficulty, or an obstacle. A moment, they remember about going on holiday, anything small and life world.

When they begin to share those stories, and it's very simple, there's no art in it. It's just a simple invitation. The whole tenor of the room shifts, the whole atmosphere shifts. People either let go of the cloak of role, or hold it more lightly. They meet, for a time, at least, in a more life world human to human way. When that happens, my experience has been that we've opened up the possibility for different kinds of conversations about what the organization should be doing.

That's the point of which we've been able to talk really seriously about what's the impact of this organization, what should it be, what you actually here for, what is it to do what you do, what are the consequences of what you do, what do you want to do about that. Because people, they are not just as the Chief Financial Officer, or the head of HR, or the chief exec. They're there as mum, dad, sister, brother, son, daughter, grandparent, as well. They're more inclined to think much more broadly and to say, actually, if we go and doing what we're doing, what's my kid's life going to be like.

To connect people, everyone can agree in theory with the importance these days of thinking about in the environmental consequences, but it gets real very quickly when you start to bring the Lifeworld into that space as well.

**[0:33:48] RT:** It raises another question for me that I thought about until you describe it this way. You do your work most often, in a room with a roomful of people. Then, along came COVID, and we're no longer in rooms with people. We were on this platform, like you and I are using right now, Zoom, to conduct a conversation. Now, we have working remote. People not necessarily going back to work. I'm just curious for your own perspective. What have you seen emerge from that, what is now kind of a structural change in how people work, for the pro and the con of that, given what you're talking about here?

**[0:34:25] GM:** Well, I used to say before COVID when people asked me, "Can we do this remotely?" I say, "No, it's impossible." And then you discover, whether it's impossible or not, you're going to do it. The impossible became possible. We learned, I think, collectively kind of learned how to communicate at least better than we had done. The trick to the trade, the breakout rooms, and all the things we're used to now. At its best, I think it's possible to communicate pretty effectively on remotely, but you don't get the quality of person's presence in the same way. I think it's a poor substitute for that. Whenever possible, I try and work face to face, but I do have to work remotely quite often. We both got better at doing it, and also, we can kid ourselves, it's as good as, and it isn't. For human connectivity, it just isn't as good.

**[0:35:16] RT:** Okay. We're entering the values of –



**[0:35:19] GM:** By the way, I can prove that. Because if you came into my house, my dog will come and sniff your trousers, and want to give your face a kiss. He looks at you on the screen, you're two dimensional, he turns away. Why should I bother to try and get to know anyone who's bottom I can't sniff. Trouble with the Internet, we don't get to sniff anyone's bottoms if we don't really get the feel for them as a person in the room.

**[0:35:45] RT:** I think I'll move on from that comment.

**[0:35:48] GM:** Metaphorically, I'm talking about.

**[0:35:50] RT:** Metaphorically, sure. We are talking about all the upsides here. You have a cautionary note about how narrative has been can be used for not good.

**[0:36:01] GM:** My goodness. Yes.

**[0:36:02] RT:** Talk a little bit about the examples of the cases that you're come to mind for you when it's been put to use.

**[0:36:09] GM:** I think we look around. I mean, where is it very obvious at the moment? It's very obvious in national politics, in many countries of the world. What stories are being told, what are we being peddled, and by whom? And on what basis are the stories being told? What relationship to the stories have to some underlying reality? I think, in a very complex, difficult situation, because the notion of evidence, and criticality is not as widely accepted as it was. We come to the point where some folk, politicians, and others will say, "This is true, because I say it's true. Because I believe it to be so, because this is an alternative truth." I think that's a tragedy for the human race, frankly. But it's a phenomenon, perhaps, has been accelerated by social media, where we are disconnected. We're not in the room, where we can say something and that floats freely without any connection with the person.

Socrates was illiterate, refuse to learn to write. What's the value of a word if you can't see the man who says it. All we know of Socrates is what Plato wrote. In those days, just even writing something was a disconnection. But now, we have the utterance, we had the story, really often not connected to the person. Sometimes it is, of course, you've got the rally and the connection.

I'm not saying it's complete, but I think it's accelerated something, and made something more possible. I think this comes with a cautionary note.

When I began this work a long time ago, everyone was pretty gung-ho about story. The best story wins and all that sort of stuff. But I think, we always had to be careful about what stories are we telling, in whose interest is the story being told. When we hear a story, whether it's an organizational story, or a personal story, or whether it's a political story, where is it coming from? Who does it serve?

The second aspect of it is to think about the quality of the story itself. How is what we're being told related to any sense of the underlying reality? At its best, I think, a story when we talk about not a fiction, I'm talking about an everyday story from life, is based on an attempt to represent some well-thought and researched understanding of what the underlying reality might be. Accepting the fact that nothing is utterly real. That doesn't mean that everything's the same or that it's all unreal. A good story, if you like, is something that has consciousness, and awareness of the foundation that is built on. But there are various ways in which that can be subverted, or diminished quite subtly.

We see for example, one of the ways of doing it, and this is very prevalent, is to use euphemisms, to diminish the presence of some elements that you want to write out of the story in some way. I am thinking of example of a report about the environmental degradation, species loss. In the report, given the purpose of the report, they couldn't bring themselves to talk about the species involved; the bears, the salmon, the wolves, the deer. They will talk about a degradation of biomass, because we could bear. It's easier to think about a loss of marine biomass than it is to think about the extinction of hundreds of species, extraordinary creatures in the water.

Hannah Arendt, in her classic work, talks about the banality of evil in relation to the Holocaust. The way that Nazi functionaries used euphemistic language, he turned it into a bureaucratic exercise. In a sense, I think, because that's almost the only way human beings can do this. We dehumanize. We can dehumanize others in order to oppress them. You can see that in various things, you could see it in – I'm thinking of the of the Hutu, the massacres there, whether we're talking about cockroaches. You kind of dehumanize or you turn people into monsters. That's one

way of kind of diminishing or moving away from truth is to dehumanize, or to diminish, or to euphemized things.

Another way of doing it is just simply leave them out the story. If you look in United Kingdom, at a television, for example, in the seventies, eighties, nineties, you would probably not have thought that there were any Black people in our country, or any gay people in our country. They were never represented, except in very occasionally, as figures of ridicule. Let's avoid, you just exclude them, you just write them out the story.

Then, at its worst, if you like, the most extreme, you've got what Baudrillard calls a simulacrum. This is a free-floating story that has no relationship to underlying reality whatsoever. A classic example of this is Enron, the energy company that became not an energy company. It became a storytelling factory, about the profits it might make if something might happen. That was represented as being true, but it wasn't, it's complete fiction. It had no relationship to the underlying reality whatsoever. Chris, my late wife, talked about simulacrum as an imitation of something that never existed, rather like that. Think of Disney World. That's a simulacrum. It's an imitation of something that never quite existed. There are many ways of kind of subverting, degrading story.

Then. there's the – another way is to try and control the story. Anytime, whether it's in society, or religion, or organization, anytime there is only one story that's acceptable, that's fundamentalism. That's a fundamentalist view of life. This is the story and you better believe it. If you don't believe it, you're out. Now, there's something I think about, how do we live in, and work with, and lead with, and in a healthy ecosystem story, in which we're seeking to influence that ecosystem. We can talk about what for, and that's really important. But we have to allow the flow of story, we have to allow the stories to return to us. We have to listen as much as we speak. We're not listening unless we're willing to be changed by what you hear.

I want to get away from the from a rather tired, cliched notion of leadership and storytelling. Which is, if I've got the best story, everyone's going to follow me into the gates of hell, heroic stories for heroic leadership. That time has come and gone. We're not living in a heroic age; we're living in the post-heroic age. We don't need more of that; we need less of it. I'm saying,

this as a proposition, of course. Others can choose their own view on it. But I think there is something really important about narrative leadership, which is much to do with listening.

When I talk about narrative leadership, I talk about these three elements. It's not just telling a good story. It's going back to last week. It's, do you know yourself? Who are you really? What do you stand for? How are we going to show up and be real? What do you care about? What do you bring to the party? Then, there's the reaching out. I call it know thyself after the Delphic Oracle. Then, I plagiarize an author to say, only connect, reach out. What do you listen to? I have a little logo of a tree in my company. The roots are reaching down to know yourself. The branches, and twigs, and leaves are reaching out into the ecosphere, to draw in nourishment from others to listen. What's the world calling for now? What's needed?

Then, the trunk is, "What do I stand for?" You can't rush that. Sometimes, I mean, people say, "I just need a good story, and that's not the work I do. Some people might do that, I don't." I want to start with, who are you and what do you care about? What's the world calling for? What's your unique contribution as an organization? Where do they come together? Because that's the sweet spot. That's where it really works. For me, narrative leadership is about a lot more than telling a good story.

**[0:43:29] RT:** Hold on a second. Go back and just dig a little deeper or expand a little bit on this last part you just said about – I'm going to get it wrong here, but you'll clean me up. Who am I or what do I stand for? Because you told me a couple of weeks ago that we ask the wrong question. What's my purpose or something in that vein. You'd had a counter to that, and you just said it, but I'd like for you to expand it a little bit, because it's so important. I don't want to lose it here.

**[0:43:58] GM:** I think, if I recall rightly, our conversation. I made a distinction between the question, "How are you?" and the question, "Who are you?" "How are you?" is an easy question to answer. "Who are you?" is a much more difficult question to answer. We have to kind of dig into that a bit to think about particularly as we become adults, as we move into and through life. We're much better able to reflect, and have choices about that. Typically, in midlife, people begin to rethink that naturally. Most people, many people, anyway, unless circumstances are so

difficult that they don't have the opportunity. But if you have the chance for some reflection or reflectivity, we often do that.

This is what I've got to do, this is how I'm showing up in the world. Is this the me I want to be? Is this how I want to show up? One of the ways to think about that is to revisit some of our stories, and what are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves that shape us in that way. There are also practices around that we can do inviting people. That little exercise we invite people to do about thinking about their early leadership story was a little taste of that, just dipping a toe into that water. Where I come? Who am I? That's interesting. Is that still true for me? Don't want it to be true. Where did it come from? All those kinds of things.

What limiting self-beliefs do I carry? Which ones are nourishing to me? Which ones are healthy, and generative? I'm making some choices, finding some agency there. Then, we had to bring that alongside this sense of listening what's being demanded of me, how broad a vision could I have of the world, what's important there. The life world as much as the system world. How do I want to think about? How far should I look in terms of breadth and time for the impact of what I do? How big is my vision?

The Romans created the word, ambition. It doesn't mean how hard the greasy pole, it comes from ambit, ambulatory, to walk. For them, ambition was literally how far would you walk around your city to talk to people to gain influence. I love this kind of breadth, sense of breadth around it.

**[0:45:53] RT:** Well, let's do a couple stories here. You passed on to me story that I don't really know too much about. The story of Sir David Varney.

**[0:46:02] GM:** Yes. I think this is a lovely example of finding this sweet spot between what the person is, who they are, where they come from, what they care about, what the organization contributes, and what is needed. David Varney, when I met him, he was chairman of what's come known as HMRC, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Doesn't sound like much, does it? It was the bringing together of the customs authority and the tax authority. It was an organization of 100,000 people, pretty big, biggest government department. He didn't have a

background as a civil servant. He'd never worked in government. He'd been very successful in industry. He'd been chairman of various companies, and senior executive, and others.

Frankly, he didn't need any money, he was quite well off enough. But he was offered this job, he applied for, and was offered this job as commissioner or chair of this organization. He came to do with a mission, to bring them together, to integrate them, and to change the culture. The trouble was, all his folk around him at various levels, including those closest to him were senior civil servants, from completely different culture. They didn't get him. He didn't land, he couldn't land. No one understood why he was there. They imputed motives of self-interest to him. They obviously wanted something out of it. We tell that, because I was working with a colleague in that business, consulting around narrative and story. It was obviously, he hadn't landed.

We went into his office one day, my colleague, Sue and I. We said, "This is a problem" and he kind of acknowledged it. We said, "Well, why are you here?" He says, "Oh, I've got quite a lot. I thought I'd give a bit back." We said, "No, no, no. We don't buy that. Why are you really here?" He kind of roll back in his chair, and he said, "Actually, I can tell you that." He said, "I was brought up in the aftermath of the Second World War. My parents had no money, my dad was a day laborer on building sites, my mum was a cleaner. I would come back from school, and show my mum my report card. 'That's really good, Dave, but you could do better, you know.' They believed in the possibility of progress of things getting better. My favorite thing to do after school was to get on my bike, and cycled whichever building site my dad was on. If I timed it right, we could walk home together. We lived in London; we walked home through London."

He said, "One night, we were walking through Docklands, not the Docklands as we know it now, these temples to Mammoth. But literally, a bonsai craters, piles of rubble, stinking blakes of filthy water, rats, and he stopped me. He put his hand on my shoulder, he said, 'Look around David, it doesn't have to be like this. We can make a country in which there are proper schools, roads, and houses, and hospitals for everyone.'" He said, "I'd never forgotten that moment. That's the reason I'm here in HMRC, because we're the people who collect the money that make that possible."

Now, that night, he told that story at a big dinner in the city. He added a third dimension to it. He told the story of his dad, why he was there, he referred to what is the unique contribution HMRC

do, is we get the resources to make things happen. Not, we collect your tax money. He said, "We have a problem. There's a 20-billion-pound gap between what's owed and what's paid, and we're going to close that gap." He brought together what Marshall Ganz called, me, ask them now, or why sometimes called passion people and purpose. He found that sweet spot where those three things came together. Within 12 hours, that story was all over that organization. He'd arrived, he'd found genuine, authentic grounds to claim a position of leadership in that organization. That's a lovely example, I think. It was a very quick study, was a very bright guy, and he got it, and he saw it, and he could pinpoint it. It was quite a magical moment.

**[0:49:36] RT:** In your book, telling the story, the heart and soul of successful leadership. You have a line in here that it thinks quite provocative and quite – well, let me read it. You say that, "It's not possible to reach our full potential as leaders or human beings without understanding how story works and how to use them." Okay. We got a lot of people here who are striving for realizing full potential. What do you say in there? What's the work for people there?

**[0:50:01] GM:** Let me add another quote to that, which is not – I'll come back to it exactly, but this is to the point. This is a quote, which I got from Laura Sims, an American storyteller, and she's got it from somewhere else. This is what she says, Anthropologist Dr. Francis Howard, a student of Margaret Mead." Remember Margaret Mead? Once asked a sue elder why people tell stories. He answered, "In order to become human beings." She asked, "Aren't we human beings already?" He smiled. Not everybody makes it.

For me, there is something about, when I talk about imagination and feeling, I'm talking heart and soul. I'm talking about, if we're only heads, we're a head on a stick, and that's a crazy thing to say, but to characterize. But if we overplay our rational selves at the expense of our intuitive feeling self, we lose something. Iain McGilchrist wrote a wonderful book, *The Master and His Emissary*, in which he says, "We've got it the wrong way around. The logical mind is a wonderful servant. It's a terrible master. We have to look to heart, and soul, and imagination, and intuition for what really matters in the world. Then, we can use our logical, rational self to help bring that about."

In that sense, I think, I argue it's true that in order to really fulfill our potential, we have to be willing to embrace both those things. Now, in the system world, heart and soul tend to be

considered as less legitimate. That's a big truism. It's not true everywhere, of course. But there's a better way of saying it, it will be perhaps that the rational self is lionized, is given undue prominence. Sometimes, it's considered to be enough. I argue that it just isn't.

**[0:51:43] RT:** I am with you. As we come to the close here, there's a real-life story that you shared with me that I was unaware of about Umicore. Would you share this? Because this, I think, brings together a lot of the bits and pieces that we discussed the last two weeks, in a real situation that turned out for good?

**[0:52:01] GM:** Yes, absolutely. I don't take credit for this. I have worked with the company subsequently. But my friend Richard Olivier, who runs a company that works with Shakespeare and Leadership, it's broader than that, but that's one of the things they do. Which sounds a bit odd when you think about it, except that there are some wonderful stories to explore. One of the stories they work with in organizations and leadership is Henry V, classic story of a young man come to take the throne and leading in all sorts of ways, good and ill.

There's a point in the story where the battles are done. The fifth act of the play is actually about turning the battlefield into a garden. If you look at the language of the fifth act, so much of it's about, this best garden in the world, it's turning from war to peace. It's turning from fighting to construction, and development, and growth. Richard was working in this company, Umicore, at senior level with this story as a vehicle to talk about leadership. It touched the chief exec very deeply.

Now, this company at that time, was a mining company. They mined all sorts of precious metals, gold, and silver, but also some of the rare metals that we use in all sorts of produce; cadmium, lithium, and all sorts of stuff. They were pretty destructive. If you looked at their portfolio and took photographs, there was strip mining, there was huge degradation around them. Basically, he said this – he went away and thought about this a lot. He came back and talked to the board, then the stakeholders, and said, "Is this the story we want to live? Really?" They realized they didn't. They wanted to live a different story. That meant taking really hardnosed difficult decisions.



They divested some of their interests, they cleaned up everywhere. So if you look at the photographs before and after this mindset, you will see sites that have been restored as best as they can. The reintroduction of species, and flora, and fauna. Over time, they moved out of mining completely. They're now the world's leading company in recycling of precious metals. Everything they do is recycled. They have a very clear commitment to what they call zero regrets, net zero, zero harm, zero inequality. It's not been an easy road. It isn't an easy road. There are challenges all the time.

There's an example of, I think, a story that was shaping actions that they began to see into, and began to say, "We want to shape a different story. We want to – and they had to take the – people had devoted lifetimes to particular ways of being in the world. It was very tough and very hard. I think it's a wonderful example of how a story can inspire. But also, it can be a template for what we want to live into. They were living into. If we go back to that Ben Okri quote, about change the stories we live by. They made a conscious decision to change the story they would live by. I think it's a wonderful example of leadership and narrative leadership.

**[0:54:59] RT:** All right. We've given opportunities for a lot of people, other people's stories and points of view to show up in our conversation for the last week and a half, two weeks. The last words are Geoff Mead's words. I know that you have some thoughts. Let's give you the last word here. Let's do that.

**[0:55:16] GM:** Okay. Well, I'd like to quote myself if that's alright. My book on storytelling leadership is called *Telling the Story: The Heart and Soul of Successful Leadership*. It was the only battle I had with the publishers, was insisting on the words heart and soul in the title. I won that battle eventually, after some struggle. But towards the end of the book, the last chapter is called, Heart and Soul. If I can go back to Ben Okri. I want to give a Ben Okri quote, then my words. Is that all right?

**[0:55:41] RT:** That's fine. This is a quotation at the head of that chapter, which I love, again, from Ben Okri. "I think that now, we need those fictional old bards, and fearless storytellers, those seers. We need their magic, their courage, their love, and their fire more than ever before. It is precisely in a fractured broken age that we need mystery and a reawakened sense of

wonder. We indeed go down to the bottom, to the depths of the heart, and start to live all over again, as we have never lived before the depths of the heart."

I wrote after that, "Heart and soul, feelings and imagination, passion and vision. Is it not strange that passion has become a commonplace word in leadership and business? My office at the time was above a food shop that declares itself to be passionate about pastry. A leader without vision is considered a laughingstock in business schools. Yet, so many writers on leadership are reluctant to acknowledge where passion and vision come from. Let us boldly reclaim these big words, heart and soul, from poetry and pop song lyrics, and wishful new age thinking to take their rightful place in our vocabularies. Metaphorically, the heart is the seat of our emotions. While the soul longs for meaning and purpose. They speak a different language from our logical rational minds. The heart expresses itself in feelings, and the soul deals in symbols and images. Our logical rational minds are swayed by information and argument. But our hearts and souls are moved by stories and their unique power to stir the feelings and stimulate the imagination of storytellers and our listeners."

**[0:57:13] RT:** Geoff Mead, thank you so much for the last two conversations. For me personally, you're talking about how to ride a train or my story of riding a train with Geoff Mead, if stay with me for a long, long time. Thank you so much, sir.

**[0:57:27] GM:** Thank you, Rick. It's been an absolute pleasure and joy. Yes, thank you. I hope our connection goes on long beyond this podcast.

**[0:57:33] RT:** You're on it. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:57:38] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

[END]