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Sent: 2022-03-27 21:13:05 UTC
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Subject: Highlights 🥦

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Highlights

Julian Shapiro

Hey friends! Every couple months, I share an essay to help you see the world in a new and interesting way. First, a photo and an insight.

Un-subscribe me, you idiot.

Look at these quiet homes at the edge of the world. Growing up, I was obsessed with far away islands. I wanted to be isolated from the noise and turmoil of a city. Above is the Múlafossur Waterfall in the Faroe Islands. Click here for a must-see video.
Photographed by Jake Hinds.

Insight

Remember your parents

Call your parents via Zoom and record it. Ask them to recount their childhood, their major life events, and their passions. Essentially, record a podcast interview.

You'll be so glad you have this when they're no longer here.

It really beats just having old photos.

—Julian

Life Updates

My new project

I'm announcing the launch of WithCarveout.com.

If you're an accredited investor, you can invest in late-stage startups with me before they go public. We've invested $9M recently.

Read the strategy here. We have some great startups you know and love.

—Julian

Today's Idea

How to tell an incredible story

Is it possible to turn anyone into a storyteller as good as Neil deGrasse Tyson?

Imagine anyone—even your bitter, old uncle—being able to command a stadium's worth of people hanging onto their every word.

I recently got to the bottom of it.

My motivation: I had been trying to start a podcast to exchange stories with great storytellers, but I sounded awful in comparison to them. Like a stressed-out amateur. I was ruining first impressions with people I've always wanted to meet, and that sucked.

So I embarked on a journey: learn to engage an audience like Neil deGrasse Tyson within 30 days. Then share my learnings with the world.

While speaking with the best storytellers on the Internet, something strange became clear: they could only articulate **some** of the ingredients that make them great. There was more beneath their explanations that they couldn't identify when pressed.

This was a puzzle.

Because these ingredients were hard to identify, I followed a process known as "learning by inversion." This is where you learn how something works by studying its *bad* examples. Then you do the opposite.

So I watched a lot of bad storytellers on YouTube.

Thanks, TED.

It quickly became clear that there are two ways to tell a story:

- In whatever way suddenly comes to mind
- **Strategically**

You're either a person telling a story or you're a *storyteller*.

Talented storytellers know something bad storytellers don't: storytelling is **the art of strategically withholding information.** Before you begin your story, you're supposed to decide which details to **withhold** until the end—to maximize suspense along the way.

In contrast, bad speakers who bore me lack narrative hooks—like you'd find at the beginning of a book or a film. A hook raises a question without immediately providing the answer. For example, "It was the worst date of my entire life." Listeners wonder, "Why?"

You're not going to tell them for a while.

Here's the first key learning: hooks require premeditation. Neil deGrasse Tyson told author David Perell that **nearly 100% of the stories and analogies he shares in interviews are first written down**. Most people don't realize this.

The best storytellers put the work in before you hear them speak.

The storyteller's craft is therefore in making that prep work **invisible**. This is important: You never want to memorize your words. You only memorize key points then you rediscover the rich details and spontaneous turns of phrases in real time. This produces pauses, moments of self-reflection, and false starts.

That's what you want.

Why? The human brain is wired to lean in when it believes someone is speaking **to** them instead of **at** them. Listeners recoil in boredom when someone reads a scripted speech **at** them. But grab someone by the collar, look them in the eye, and tell them the crazy thing that happened to you, and they'll be glued.

In short: Feel no shame in artificially preparing your stories, but be a good enough actor to make it seem like you didn't prepare at all.

Next, I noticed that the best storytellers take the hook methodology to an extreme: they intersperse many hooks throughout their narrative by continually raising questions without **immediately answering them**. When they finally get to the nail-biting answers, they then **drag out the telling**.

Dragging is our second key lesson.

For example, consider how the climax of a blockbuster film is always a drawn out action scene. The action is never resolved within seconds—even if that's how long it would take in real life to play out.

Instead, every detail is magnified. Every punch is slow-motion.

Beyond slow motion, great films also slow down the parts *between* the action. When the audience senses danger in a horror film, their truest fear emerges **between** the jump scares. It's the anticipation that kills us.

In other words, storytelling is not only the art of strategically withholding information, it's also the art of time dilation.

Filmmaking teaches us more about storytelling, including the necessity of having a hero and a villain. We're hardwired to put ourselves into the shoes of others and root for them like we *are* them. That's what happens when you read fiction or cheer on a boxer in a fight: **you transfer your identity into theirs and live their experience**—instead of it being told **at** you.

Can you restructure your stories through the lens of a hero—instead of being an omniscient author?

Heroes and villains don't have to be people. The hero can be Earth and the villain can be climate change. Just give the audience an identity to transfer themselves into.

Okay, let's pause.

Let's take inventory of our new storytelling ingredients: limited memorization, hooks, climaxes with time dilation, and a hero's perspective.

Now let's try these out on my podcast—the reason I'm doing all this research in the first place.
I took to the mic and recorded a test episode for our show.

I sucked. Noticeably. The stories were still clinical. They resonated intellectually but not emotionally. I was robotic and amateur.

It was no better than a middle-of-the-road TED talk. Yikes.

So I chewed on the experience for a few days.

I came to realize that the problem wasn't the story's content nor structure. Instead, **the delivery was off.** I was no Neil deGrasse Tyson. I was a lame dude rambling dry words into a microphone. Apple's Siri might as well have been telling the story for me.

So I returned to YouTube. Perhaps learning by inversion wasn't the right approach. Let's embark on a different quest: find the best spoken storytellers on the planet and mix their *signature techniques* together.

After days of browsing, I finally came across remarkable speakers who could make anyone lean in. They were forces of gravity.

The ingredient that I noticed each of them employed was **vocal rhythm**. This is the art of:

- Varying your speed
- Varying your volume
- Varying your enthusiasm and energy
- Using staccato and rhythm
- And most of all… pausing. The art of purposeful silence.

Silence, in particular, is one of the easiest and most powerful ways to play up a moment. During a moment of silence, listeners can only do two things: reflect more on what just happened or greater fear what comes next.

Click here now to hear what masterful variation and silence sound like. It's only a three minute video.

Notice his time dilation—how he stretches out moments and syllables. And notice his hero's perspective. He's made it his story, and in doing so he's made it personal to the audience who've transferred their identities.

The more I listened to vocal variation, the clearer it became that **spoken storytelling is a form of music**. You talk. Then faster. You go silent. You strike with fast staccato sentences. The audience feels pressured on their heels. Then you slow down to quiet your voice. Now they relax. A sigh of relief.
Without vocal rhythm and pauses, you're just a human wall of text.

Alright, this felt like a key breakthrough in my treasure hunt. I'm ready to re-record the podcast.
But, first, let's recap the storytelling ingredients so far: limited memorization, hooks, climax with time dilation, a hero's perspective, and **vocal rhythm**.

In the re-recording, I successfully nailed **every** story beat as planned. I was finally compelling.
Sweet. I'm onto something.

But…

There was something big missing.

I was a competent storyteller, but I was nowhere near as captivating as Neil deGrasse Tyson. Audience reactions were more like "Cool story, bro"—not "holy crap, that was interesting." No one's leaning in, remembering my stories, and binging more.

Months of work and I had only become *decent* at storytelling with no real justification for anyone to listen to me.

Frankly, it appeared I still lacked soul and charisma. I was completely unlike the ultra-charismatic actors—John Krasinski and Tom Holland—who I've seen light up talk shows.

Wait a minute.

Does this relate back to the missing ingredient that the great storytellers couldn't articulate when pressed at the start? Is the missing ingredient **how to project soul and likeability** to light up a room?

I think so. I felt I had reverse engineered everything else by now, so this had to be the last bit.
But if the great storytellers can't articulate how they draw people in so well, how am I going to figure it out? Is it just "genetic?"

I don't know. And so I paused the podcast.

If it wasn't going to be good, and if it was a chore to record, then I was done.

***** One year later. *****

One of my favorite people on the planet is Courtland Allen. He runs a startup community and has a podcast of his own. One day he asked, "Do you want to start a podcast with me?"

This was one of those opportunities where you don't say no and you lean into the serendipity. But I knew I didn't have "it" on camera yet. I never did.

We went ahead and recorded a sample episode anyway. We brought in big guests from the tech industry. We gave it our all during recording.

Want to know how it turned out?

…It sucked. Obviously. The episodes were lifeless, like before, and not worth listening to.

I refuse to make content that's below average and I couldn't find a way out of mediocrity. And I had painfully wasted our guests' time. (Sorry, Ryan and Greg.)

I had put a lot of time into this by pursuit now. Hundreds of hours. Across years.

However, this time, I was militantly determined to finish my treasure hunt and find the missing storytelling ingredient.

I remembered that the big thing that helped last time was studying the greats on YouTube. So, I went back to that.

After a week of wandering, I came across a guy named Jason Silva. When watching this video from him, it became clear what likeability and charisma are. Jason is a force of gravity:

Click here to watch the YouTube video.

What's going on here?

Why does Jason feel alive, engaged, and magnetic? What's the difference between he and I?

In paying attention to what was happening *beneath the words*, I noticed that Jason was using a technique: **he blows his own mind when he recounts his stories.**

Blowing your own mind entails being excited at moments of excitement, being shocked at moments of shock, and being wowed at moments of wonder. Listeners feed off this like sugar.

This, it turns out, is far more important than vocal rhythm or any other delivery trick.

Because, when you blow your own mind, something mesmerizing happens: **you relive the story and its impact on you in real-time**. People then see that reflected on your face and in your authentic emotions.
It's irresistibly infectious for the audience.

Not one great storyteller had articulated this to me before.

This works so well because of the phenomenon of "mirror neurons," as some call it: when you see a fighter break their ankle, you wince in pain. When you see someone who can't breathe from laughing so hard, you smile. And—the classic—when the person next to you yawns, you yawn too.

We can trace the roots of this phenomenon through years of evolution: picture a hunter-gatherer rushing down from the mountaintop to frantically gather his tribespeople. He's exasperated and trying to recount what just happened: a pack of starving lions sprinted after him for *half a mile*. The tribe is glued to his every word because they **feel** the horror on his face—and they fear that could have been **them**.

It. Could. Have. Been. Them.

That's the feeling you need to transfer into your audience. **They do not feel it in their bones unless it looks like you're feeling it first.**

This storytelling ingredient—blowing your own mind—made me realize that my treasure hunt was doomed to fail because I was looking for the byproducts of great storytelling. Things like vocal rhythm and so on. But it turns out that, by reliving experiences, **your body captures all the great storytelling ingredients automatically**: it knows how to vary vocal delivery, it knows when to pause, and it knows when to emphasize. Because when your mind relives emotions**, your body reacts to them instinctively. You become walking cinema.**

Diving further into Jason's videos, I found more insights: while blowing his own mind, Jason **exudes charisma**. I noticed that charisma is the state of projecting three qualities at once: **confidence** + **joy** + **love for your audience**. When you embody all three, you put listeners at ease. They feel like you truly want them to be there. And when they feel that way, your thoughts flow into listeners' minds without friction. Listeners lower their guards and their judgment. They're no longer focused on your eccentricities, insecurities, and weird hand movements. Instead, they've opened their minds to you.

The more a storyteller loses themselves in their own telling, the more the audience does too.

For you to drop your self-consciousness so that a crowd drops theirs, you have to embrace what theater coach Konstantin Stanislavski calls "public solitude," which is the ability to behave like you're alone when you're in front of a room full of people staring at you.

Personally, I'm joyful in real life, but when the camera lights start blinking, that part of me dies. I fail the test of public solitude. In contrast, people who can hop on a podcast and act 100% themselves pass the test.

There was more I picked up from Jason and other great storytellers: if charisma is projecting confidence, joy, and love for your audience, **you can't skip the joy part**. This ties into why I was failing at podcasting. There was no joy in my voice. I had none of the likeability of actors like John Krasinski or Tom Holland.

In contrast, I noticed that the most likeable storytellers appeared to be **smiling—in their minds—when speaking**. But you didn't **see** it on their faces—that can feel inauthentic. Instead, you felt the joy in their words.

So I tried this myself: when speaking, in my mind's eye, I imagined I was smiling from ear to ear.

Wow, did this have an effect.

It recreated, at will, the dynamic of talking to someone I'm incredibly delighted to be around.

That's exactly what you want.

It turns out that, when you smile in your mind's eye, it shifts how you let words out of your mouth. It adds a light bounce to how you speak. A warmth and a spark.

This is yet another technique for tricking your brain in a way that makes you a more compelling storyteller. There's a lesson here: self-illusion is a huge part of storytelling.

And so, my friends, the storytelling picture was becoming unblurred: it turns out that the forces behind great story delivery are simple. You focus on two things and your body reflexively does the rest:

- Blow your own mind
- Imagine yourself smiling from ear to ear while talking

By doing this, you become the best storytelling version of yourself. It is an **amplification** of who you are, **not a mimicking**—of Neil deGrasse Tyson or anyone else. That was a flawed goal.

And so Courtland and I sat down to record our podcast yet again.

I felt confident I had the ingredients this time.

We bought the show's domain name, designed the graphics, told our friends about it, and started inviting the big guests we always wanted.

I messaged one potential guest who happened to be following me on Twitter. I asked if he'd be our first-ever guest.

He surprised me by saying yes.

Guess who it was?

Jason Silva. YouTube's ultra-charismatic storyteller.

I then went to Tim Urban to ask if he'd co-guest with Jason. Tim Urban is the mind behind Wait But Why. He's one of the best storytellers of our era.

He too said yes.

Me, Jason, Tim, and Courtland sat down for one hour to talk about a single idea:

Storytelling.

Midway into the episode, I told Jason a story of my own. It used the ingredients in this post.

He loved it.

The episode turned out wonderfully.

Before we wrapped, I asked Jason about the concept of "blowing your own mind." I said: "Is this what you've been doing? I think that was the answer to my year-long puzzle."

He said yes.

It turns out he relives the feelings he had for each idea before speaking. **He doesn't hit record until he reaches that emotional place again.**

Treasure hunt complete.
Blowing your own mind was the unspoken ingredient no one could articulate.

We're off to the races now. You can listen to the podcast here: brainspodcast.com.

—Julian

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