

**Business of Story Podcast with Jonathan Gottschall - "Why We're Storytelling Animals"**

Park: Welcome to another edition of the Business of Story. I'm Park Howell, and with you today we have a phenomenal author who you will meet in just a moment, who I have learned a ton from in my work both not only within our agency for brand work, but in my work over at ASU for our Executive Master's For Sustainability Leadership. And although he's written, actually I think just published his eighth book, it's his seventh book that is so interesting, has been so inspirational to me called, "The Story Telling Animal." So I would like to introduce you to Jonathan Gottschall who is a Fellow in the English Department at Washington Jefferson University, or College I guess that is.

Jonathan: That's right.

Park: He's written several books. Is it on your eighth book right now, "A Professor in the Cage," is that number eight, Jonathan?

Jonathan: That's number eight, yep.

Park: Number eight. And this guy has been recognized everywhere, the New York Times Magazine, New York Times Scientific American, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Nature Science, and on NPR several times, and most recently earlier this week talking about his new book. In fact, it preempted our earlier recording. So I'm very honored to have Jonathan take some time out, because he's been very busy pushing his book. But ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to Jonathan Gottschall. Welcome, Jonathan.

Jonathan: Hey, thanks, Park. Thanks for having me on. It's always good to talk with you.

Park: Well, you've been a speaker a couple of times to our class over at ASU. And what I've always been fascinated with about, and what you talk about in your background is how you studied this intersection between art and science. And when I found your book, "The Story Telling Animal" is when our youngest son was going through some challenges with some encephalitis. He had to have some brain surgery, it all worked out great, all worked out well.

Jonathan: Wow!

Park: But in my studies as I was understanding what he was going through, and reading I suppose more pop-psychology than anything, because that's what my brain could download, I came across your book and "The Story Telling Animal." And it really helped me bring everything together as a non-academic at the time, or not a brain scientist, but why stories work on our minds. So let me ask you that, Jonathan, why are we the story telling animal?

Jonathan: Well yeah, I mean, story has this enormous role in human life. And it's such a huge part of our life. It takes up so much of our lives on earth, everything from our daydreams to our night dreams to the stories that we spend in traditional fiction to our conspiracy theories, arguably to our religions. Everything in human life, so much in human life is constructed in story terms. But it's so much part of our lives that we rarely think about it. We rarely ask ourselves those big sort of why questions.

And so, storytelling is kind of an evolutionary mystery. Why does the human species spend so much of our time constructing stories, consuming stories? And the answer is probably multi-part; you know we enjoy stories, that's one reason. There's probably parts of storytelling that have no purpose at all. But most biologists, most literary scholars who've looked into this also think there's a sort of adaptive role for storytelling. That story serves a purpose in our lives for instance as a way of testing out competing scenarios. So you get to try out in your mind what it would be like to follow different courses of action. And you get a lot of vicarious experience from the stories that we consume.

**Park:** And as the guy that not only consumes massive amounts of stories, but writes them, and publishes them, what do you see are the biggest challenges with companies and content marketers and where now everybody can be an author of their own reputes online. What are the basic things that they miss in telling a story that will really resonate?

**Jonathan:** Well, this is the wonderfully exciting time for story in all of its forms. There's all these technological innovations, and as you say, everyone now has access to publishing. So we can publish on Facebook, we can publish on Twitter, we can publish on our blogs. There's no gatekeepers' controlling access to the marketplace. So that has created wonderful opportunities, but also incredible challenges, because there's such a cacophony of storytelling out there. There's so much out there. It's so hard to break through with your own message. It's so hard to actually be heard.

So you know, one of the things people can do in that case is you can't opt out, you have to get involved in the contest of stories where sort of the best story will win. And so, a lot of my work has sort of been focused on that. How can people in the business community, work that I've done with the business community I should say. How can people in those fields who don't necessarily have a humanities background or haven't studied literature in college, who weren't creative writing majors, how can they learn to be more effective story tellers?

**Park:** And do you have one, two or three tips that you can point them to, that they can use right away?

**Jonathan:** Sure, I mean, what I've tried to do to be honest is just sort of transfer the wisdom of a basic creative writing class over to people in what I call the sort of persuasion and communication trades. So you know, one of the things that you'd learn very early on in a creative writing class is that story has a very predictable structure. Stories are not endlessly variable.

If you look at it like a human face for instance there's a big difference between my ugly mug and Brad Pitt's mug. But there's a certain structure; the nose is going to be about in the same place, the eyes will be in the same place, the mouth will be in the same place. And so, story is the same way there's a big difference between a really cruddy story and a great work of literature for instance, but they're both basically following that basic structure.

And the structure is very simple. It's simple, but if you don't employ it, you have very little chance of telling a story that's effective, that rivets human attention, that

works its way into our memories, gets us to feel differently, think differently. And I call that structure a problem structure; it's as simple as that.

Stories are about characters. The character has a problem or a predicament, they have some sort of trouble in their lives, and they attempt to solve it. Stories have this problem - solution- structure. And the naughtier the problem, the cornier the problem, the more creative the solution, the more it sort of picks those locks in our brains. And the locks open up this capacity in the brains of what psychologists call narrative transportation, that sense we get of being lost inside a story, of losing ourselves in Neverland. And when we lose ourselves in Neverland, we reach a sort mental state that's very appealing to communicators. We're more open minded in that condition. We're more open minded inside a good story, and we're more persuadable. We're more likely to be able to change our mind about things.

Park: You've got a really terrific article among many in Fast Company Magazine, I believe where I read it where you talked about story being the Trojan Horse. That it's the best way to actually deliver data is through story telling. Can you elaborate a little on that a little bit?

Jonathan: Yeah, so, I mean, basically the metaphor of the Trojan Horse is that story is a kind of vehicle for a message. And so, the story of the Trojan Horse is just about, everybody will remember the Greeks are fighting this war against Troy, and they pretend to sail away. They leave the Trojan Horse at the gate; the Trojan Horse is packed with warriors. The Trojans look at it, and they just see it as a wonderful gift. It's very beautiful, and they pull it into the city, and of course they're pulling their doom into the city. And the idea is something similar to that happens with story. That story can act like a Trojan Horse that smuggles information, and smuggles a message into the human mind.

We always look at a story as a gift, just like those Trojans did. We can't help but be compelled by them. We can help but love the story. But it often smuggles in information that we didn't necessarily bargain on. As you can hear or sense this is a pretty ugly metaphor, you know the metaphor of death and destruction. And a story teller as a manipulator and a liar.

So we don't have to look at it that way. The story can also smuggle in information that is completely harmless, completely helpful to the reader or to the consumer of the story. But as that metaphor suggests, a story is a very, very powerful thing. It's not necessarily a good thing. If you have an evil person, they can use a story very effectively to evil ends. But the story is a very powerful tool of communication and persuasion.

Park: Well, and that's one of the rules of listening to the Business of Stories. You can only use this for good and not evil.

Jonathan: That's right.

Park: Speaking of good, I think this is a great time to throw to one of our wonderful sponsors who has helped make all of this possible. So we'll be back with Jonathan Gottschall, the author of "The Story Telling Animal" and his newest book, "The Professor in the Cage," which we'll talk about right when we come back. Thank you.

Park: Okay. So here we go. Welcome back to the Business of Story, my name is Park Howell and we are very fortunate today to have with us author and English Professor Jonathan Gottschall. Jonathan you were talking a little bit earlier in the program about winning the contest of story out there. And how technology has leveled the playing field, and we can all be our own poets, authors, musicians, producers, and share our stories with the world which creates of course, this amazing cacophony of communication and the attention dichotomy. And you talked a little bit later about story structure, that's problem-solution. Is it as simple as coming down to the three basic structural elements of story of exposition, conflict, resolution?

Jonathan: In some ways it is, yeah. I think in some ways it's exactly that simple. People resist that, because we want to see a story as very, very complex, almost magical form of art. But you know, it's, yeah, when you get down to it, and it doesn't mean that once you have those three elements you're going to tell a good story. I mean, there's still a huge amount of work to do. A huge amount of work and craftsmanship, and art.

So the big thing I tell my students I think this is a useful thing to tell people in the business field as well, is that when you look at a story, a story you love, a movie you love, a TV show you love, a novel you love, and if it's any good, probably by the end you're saying to yourself, "Well I could never do that. That's really hard. That looks really, really hard. And in fact looks more than hard, looks impossible. This person who did this must have been a real genius." And there is a certain level of genius involved.

But for the most part, great story tellers are really made and not born. One of the things that we talked about in the past, Park, were these manuscripts you could look at from great writers. And you can see this great novelist, Nobel Prize winning novelist even, and you can go back to their manuscripts and you can see how hard they're slaving at things. You can see that this work did not come naturally for them; they were working very, very hard at their work. And I think that's a big lesson for all story tellers to take home. All we see is that beautiful finished product. We don't see the hard, brutal slog the story teller went through to get to that beautiful, polished final point.

Park: Well that's a really good point, because I'm in the throes too of writing my book on "Story Built," and I've gone through a couple of versions of it, had a couple editors look back at it. So I'm working through that, and I have that same pain I suppose that all first-time authors have, like, man is this really going to be that good? I'm just trying to transfer all this knowledge."

And when I read "The Professor in the Cage," and I just love how you tell a story, and as you know, I can relate to so much of it, because the short story and this, and I'll turn it over to you in a second, is that then this teacher, this professor for so long, and in your late 30s you decided that you wanted to study and write about why men fight, and why we like to watch this. And so, you put yourself into an MMA program, did I say that right? MMA program, and became a cage fighter, spent three years in the cage. And then had your ultimate bout, but what struck me in all of that, as I was reading your book, I'm like, "Oh man, I got to start all over, it's written so well." But then I remember how many iterations you showed us in the class, like 40 different iterations.

Jonathan: That's right.

Park: And then at the end of it too, you also called out, like five editors. And I'm thinking, "Whoa, he didn't just tackle it on his own. Yes, he did the lion's share of the work," but you surrounded yourself with really good people. So can you talk a little bit about that process for us?

Jonathan: Well, you say, you know that you have this problem as a first time author, you're like, "Man, I just don't know if I can do it. I don't know if this is ever going to click. I don't know if it's ever going to come together. I don't know if this is going to be any good. I don't know if I'm going to humiliate myself." That's what all . . .

Park: Check on that last one, exactly.

Jonathan: Well, you're vulnerable man. You write a book, you write a story, and you put it out in the world, you're vulnerable. It's actually in the social media age, so it's something I deal with all the time is jerks and trolls, just coming out of the woodwork and ruining my day with nasty reviews, you know? But the emotional thing you're going through is exactly what I go through with everything that I write. It never goes away. It never gets easy.

There's an upside to story, and the upside to story is that it's very, very powerful man. It's more memorable, we like stories, we like story tellers, it works its way into our memories, it persuades us. It's a really, really powerful tool of communication. But, and the but is enormous, the psychological studies show that none of this voodoo power that story has actually kicked in unless the story is actually good. That's the big if, and it's really hard to tell a good story.

Not that you need to be the greatest artist who ever lived, not that you need to be the most creative, high IQ genius who ever lived, but you at least have to have a temperament that lends itself to good story telling. And it's usually a sort of no matter what genre you're working in, it's usually basically a writer's temperament. Someone who can sit down for hours and hours a day, sit there heroically in his or her chair. Sit through all the pain and suffering and doubt, sit there for years on end if that means that. And finally in the end, have confidence and hope that at the end there will be a good story there.

Park: So tell us a little bit of background on yourself. You have been this professor, and you've been teaching English, and in your book, "The Professor in the Cage," you've talked about getting yourself fired by becoming a MMA fighter. And the fact that you couldn't land that big academic career, you talk quite a bit in the book about too, and I asked myself, "How can an author with your background and credentials not have already been accepted in that big academic career you know to move on?" Tell us a little about that.

Jonathan: Yeah, I mean that's a bit of a sad story. I'm somewhat biased here of course, so you're going to be hearing my point of view on this. And people in other academics who are not big fans of mine might have a different story about this. But I was doing, as you said at the outset in your introduction, I was doing this work in the humanities, I was a literary scholar. But I was very interested in questions about the nature of story. Why do we tell stories at all in the first place? How did human beings become a story telling animal? It's a very strange activity for an animal to get up to.

And so these questions I was addressing, I was interested in as a scholar, as an intellectual, as a writer, were questions at the intersection of the sciences and the arts, they were sort of in-between. And so, I explored ways of using sort of biology as a theoretical lens to get into these questions, and I pursued the use of quantitative scientific methods in a lot of my research. And I ended up basically pursuing a career path that was kind of a challenge to my entire field.

And it was kind of a criticism of the entire field. I was very depressed and annoyed with the way that people in the field of literary studies in particular never figured anything out. They never get a sense of truer understanding of the questions that they are addressing. And so, basically the field I'm in is conservative. I don't mean conservative in a Republican or Democrat sense, I mean conservative in the sense that we'll keep things how they were. And my work is sort of a challenge to those old fashioned humanities traditions.

**Park:** So jumping in the cage at what? A ripeful age of 38 was not quite the conservative demeanor your contemporaries were looking for?

**Jonathan:** Well, the problem with that was, I was just a few months short of 40 when I had my fight. I trained for about 15 months. Had the fight, then trained for about two more years, and quit when I was about, almost 42. And well, the reason I hoped I could get myself fired there, was two reasons. One, my bosses in the English Department would literally be able to look up from their desks, look right across the street to the cage fighting studio, and see me fighting in the cage. And it's a huge understatement to say that people in English Departments are not big fans of blood sport. So I figured it would be sort of a scandal. I figured it would cause a bit of consternation among my colleagues.

But in fact, my colleagues kind of knew me, and they knew I wasn't a savage, knew I wasn't a mean guy. But I do think, I did think it in the book that may help my dream come true of ruining my academic career, because the reception from my colleagues and the larger intellectual community has been pretty cool so far.

**Park:** So in the entire process of going and training, and understanding why men fight that went into the book, what did you learn? What's the big moral of that particular story?

**Jonathan:** Boy, I don't know, man. I have never been good at elevator pitches. I'll say a couple of things. One is I went into the cage, to step back a little bit, what happened was, this cage fighting gym opened up literally directly across the street from the English Department. And I thought that was just kind of funny. I thought the juxtaposition of the savagery of the cage fighting gym with the cultivated, cultured, English Department right across the street, I just thought it was just a crazy, juxtaposition. And that I had this thought, "Well, you know maybe I'll go over there."

And it was kind of a joke at my own expense at first. The joke was I'm almost 40; I've literally never been in a fight in my whole life. I have this incredibly civilized job; wouldn't it be funny if I became a cage fighter? And my next thought was, "Well maybe there's a book in that. A sort of non-fiction version of fight club." I go across the street, I try to learn how to fight, but I'd also be doing it to ask these sort of big questions, about the role that violence has played in human life.

And going in, I did have a big idea in mind, and the idea was MMA or cage fighting is this perfect metaphor for something dark and nasty, and rotten at the core of human life. And I wanted to use cage fighting as this way of exploring sort of the dark side of men. And then I go over there, and I start doing the research, and basically all of my previous conceptions about the sport, about the guys who did it, about the emotions and feelings that drive them into this combat, all those preconceptions I've had were overturned. And I came to see things like cage fighting and other forms of sport, not as this I don't know, metaphor for the darkness in men, but as one of myriad ways that men keep darkness in check. It's a way of channeling aggression down relatively safe pathways.

Park: Well, it's a really fascinating book, and I highly recommend anyone that's interested in this. It's a very funny tale that Jonathan tells, and everything he experiences in the process. So the story telling is wonderful. But then what you find in the process about uncovering what you just said about why men fight, and why we like to watch. And women, I think this is interesting to them as well. I know I kept reading segments of it to my wife all last week, and as I say, "Hey, check this out." And she would laugh at it, but great book. Where . . .

Jonathan: I've been very, very pleased more than anything the reception of the book, by the reception of women readers. I've had a very warm reception from them, because it's sort of, I think women have been attracted to it, because it's a little bit of a cheat sheet. Sort of an explanation to some of the weirder aspects of men.

Park: Kind of the inside sort of knuckle dragging ways is what you're saying.

Jonathan: Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, precisely.

Park: And the last thing I'll say on the book right now before we through it to our next sponsor break is that it has to be like the best book cover I've ever seen designed. I talked about that a couple of weeks ago, just love the cover. So if you're listening out there, go check it out on Amazon.com or do you have another website that you would want them to go to Jonathan?

Jonathan: Oh, you could, I mean you could also see my website Jonathan Gottschall.com, and you can read about the book there, and see some of the press about the book as well.

Park: And that's Gottschall, G-O-T-T-S-C-H-A-L-L. Jonathan Gottschall.com. So well let's take a break. Let's throw it again to one of our wonderful sponsors, and we will be right back with the Business of Story and Jonathan Gottschall.

Park: Welcome back to the Business of Story with me and author, English Professor, and cage fighter extraordinaire Jonathan Gottschall. Well Jonathan as we wrap up the show today, I want to talk a little bit about, of course this is metaphoric, all of us in marketing, communications, brand strategy wherever we're trying to communicate an interesting topic, we are cage fighters in the realm of social media, and trying to get our story heard through the context of storytelling.

So what advise do you have for our listeners? If they are trying to cut through the clutter on Twitter and you've got 140 characters to do it, or to have a blog standout a little bit more, or your six second Vine video to your two to three minute video,

long form. What can we all learn as niche story tellers in our own way to make our work better in the simplest of ways, to cut through the clutter?

Jonathan: Yeah, boy it's a big challenge. The bad news is, it's a challenge, and it really is very difficult to be heard these days. The good news is, is that the DNA, the basic structure of storytelling never changes. So all the digital technologies is taking off, and all these new tools are merging, but at bottom the structure of stories is now as it always was, and as it probably ever will be.

And what that means is that people like you, people in this audience, can turn to the very best story tellers in the world, and take advice from them. That's what I always tell people to do. Don't go read the business books on storytelling; don't even go read my book on storytelling. Go read the creative writers; go read the best story tellers in the language.

So what I tell people to do, if you're very serious about this, go read books like John Gardner's "On the Art of Writing." Other books on my shelves I have a number of them on my shelves. One of them is a great book, Stephen King's "On Writing" wonderful guide to the art of storytelling by a very talented and prolific story teller. It's about 500 pages long, but I love how he boils it down to one sentence. He says, "If you really want to tell stories, well you have to do two things" he's talking to writers, but this applies to all story tellers. He says, "You must do two things above all; you must write a lot, and you must read a lot."

So the idea of reading a lot is that you are studying how other people are doing it. So you find the people in the business community who are telling the best stories, and you reverse engineer how they do it. You take those stories apart, and you see how they tick. The other part of it is, so you study up on the competition, King says, and at the same time you write a lot. So King is saying you must practice. This is really hard work; this is no day in the park. Great story tellers work very, very hard at it.

And the last thing I'll say is when I'm talking to people, I always recommend that they actually write down their stories. So there's a lot of oral story telling in the culture right now, "TED Talks" and [inaudible 00:29:19] "Story Hour" and whatever else is taking off. But it's sort of a pseudo world culture. "TED Talks" are written out. They are drilled, and they are memorized." [inaudible 00:29:30] "Story Hour" is written out. It is drafted, it is scripted, and it is memorized, and then delivered in oral fashion. A great stand-up comedian is for the most part doing bits that they've written down and rehearsed in just about memorized. So almost all great story telling is based at least in draft forms on written versions. And I'd recommend that people actually write those stories down.

Park: Well, that's a great point. I guess you don't know what you know until you write them down. And as I've learned too you don't really know what you know until you have to teach it to somebody.

Jonathan: True.

Park: So you have been a terrific professor for us today, Jonathan, and I really appreciate your time. How long has your new book been out, and I know you've been really busy. Where have you been running around doing the book promo?



Jonathan: Oh you know, it's been a really gratifying experience. People have really been liking . . . I have wonderful reviews like Amazon reviews, that kind of thing. People have really connected with it. I've been in New York, LA I'm going to Amsterdam in a couple of days. I've been running around, been pretty crazy.

Park: Well, again if you want to see some of Jonathan's work, first and foremost from a story telling standpoint, highly, highly recommend "The Story Telling Animal." Terrific read, filled with lots of great stories. But it shows you in this world why story telling is not a gimmick that a lot of people think it is, but how we are actually hard-wired beings for story. And I think my favorite line out of there that I saw that Brian Grazer used in his new book about "A Curious Mind" he borrowed from you, "Of what human mind yields helplessly to the seduction of story."

Jonathan: Yeah, just can't help it.

Park: So we should use that a lot more in our lives. Anyways, thank you, Jonathan. And thank you all for listening to this edition of the Business of Story. I want to remind you that we have a ton of downloadable story telling tools at the Business of Story.com. And they're all meant for you marketers, content marketers out there, businesses that need to write and tell a more compelling story about your brand, and your products, and your services. And as Jonathan mentioned earlier in this broadcast, do it for good, and not evil.

But thank you for watching, and remember to go to iTunes or Stitcher, either way will be a help to us. And give us a review. Let us know what you think, give us some stars in there if you think we've earned the stars. Share the podcast with your friends, and please let me know through the Business of Story.com of what else you would like to have covered. Where we can bring some more guests on, and anything you would like to know about. How to become a very intentional and pragmatic story teller to help you nudge the world in any direction you chose. So thank you again Jonathan, and thank you all for listening. This is Park Howell.

Jonathan: I had fun, Park, thanks.