

Communications and Culture

Invoking Cultural Themes Rooted in American & Australian Culture

Background notes prepared for

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Introduction

Writing and speaking thematically is important to effective communication. But how do we prepare ourselves to do it? That's what I want to talk about today.

It is most useful, in my view, to **approach themes from a cultural perspective**. Every culture has dominant “stories” and “morality tales” that are passed down from generation to generation.¹ These stories have themes that define desirable traits or characteristics of people or groups and the values and virtues² that are widely shared — the so-called **dominant values**.³ For this reason, **the cultural themes of one nation (whether it is the US or Australia or any other country) will typically differ to some degree from those of another**. Indeed, in many nations the cultural themes that have traction with the people may differ from region to region or even valley to valley.⁴

There has been no better demonstration of this for me than when I came to Australia. All of a sudden, I encountered **some of Australia's dominant values**, values that are expressed through

¹ See, for example, William J. Bennett (ed.). *The Children's Book of Virtues*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

² Bennett (ibid.) suggests there are ten “universal” virtues that encompass all cultures that should be used to guide all behavior — including: (1) Self-discipline, (2) Compassion, (3) Responsibility, (4) Friendship, (5) Work, (6) Courage, (7) Perseverance, (8) Honesty, (9) Loyalty, and (10) Faith.

³ I have been most influenced by the writings of Harold D. Lasswell, who reserved a central position for the role of values in the study of public policy. See, for example, Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan. *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell. *The Policy Sciences: Recent Developments in Scope and Method*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951. For an application of the policy sciences paradigm, see Myres McDougal, Harold D. Lasswell and Ivan A. Vlasic. *Law and Public Order in Space*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963; Harold D. Lasswell. *A Preview of Policy Sciences*. New York: Elsevier, 1971; Robert Rubinstein and Harold D. Lasswell. *The Sharing of Power in a Psychiatric Hospital*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.

⁴ For an interesting discussion of how deep-rooted themes vary from culture to culture and what they mean for social and policy analysis, see the “methodology” entry of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

everyday expressions like “**mate**” and a “**fair go**”. I also found a willingness to call “**rubbish**” for what it is, and the “**no worries**” spirit that embodies a forgiving temperament and gives people a lot of latitude. The “**good onya**” that encourages, heartens, gives confidence and shows appreciation. The whole concept of “**stuffing it**” that shows an ability to impose standards without disparagement. This, I have found, is also reflected in the **stories that Australians have grown up with**.⁵ And both societies have deep roots in the Anglo-Saxon tribe which includes a Judeo Christian worldview.⁶

The important thing is to **be aware of these themes and to use them to communicate and to design communications**. Why don't people like **technical and scientific writing**? Because scientific and technical writing typically omits cultural references that provide a context, that help people understand. And when the science writers do include familiar cultural referents, they are often best sellers — such as James D. Watson's account of the discovery of the “double helix”,⁷ a discovery that won him a share of a Nobel Prize and ignited the biotech revolution.

⁵ These stories are found everywhere. See for example, **anthologies** such as Carmel Bird (ed.), *The Penguin Century of Australian Stories*, London: Penguin Books, 2000. See also **social commentaries** like *The Lucky Country* by Donald Horne, *Silencing Dissent* by Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison, *Acting on Conscience*, by Frank Brennan, and, of course, the writings of Hugh MacKay — most recently, *Advance Australia Where...?* And journals such as *Quadrant* on the right and *The Monthly* on the left. **Playrights** like David Williamson — in fact I just saw *Don's Party* few months back at the Opera House. **Children's books** such as Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* (first introduced to me by our colleague, Kate McKenzie), and perhaps most importantly — for me at least, **Aussie movies** — like *The Castle* and *Kenny* and *The Dish*, and, of course, *Breaker Morant*, *Lantana*, *The Oyster Farmer*, and that classic tale of political intrigue, *Rats in the Ranks*.

⁶ On the concept of worldview, see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2002; or Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1992 where he details the “creation, fall, redemption, restoration” worldview that dominates western story-telling — even secular story-telling and filmmaking. For a secular view, see the concept of “paradigm shifts” in Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd edition, 1996. For a secular application of the worldview concept, see the recent work of *Megatrends* author and futurist John Naisbitt, *Mindset*, New York: Collins, 2006.

⁷ James D. Watson and Lawrence Bragg. *The Double Helix : A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA*. New York: New American Library, 1991 (re-issue).

Each of the following 10 themes has deep roots in American culture⁸, and, I think, in Australian culture as well.⁹

These are important because **people understand and identify with culturally-rooted messages**. That's why effective leaders invoke these themes. When political leaders or civic leaders in business, education, or sport invoke one or more of these themes to make a point, they increase their chances of “connecting” with the people, with “communicating” in the sense of being “heard” and “understood” — no matter what the specific words may be.

1. Triumphant individual — e.g., Horatio Alger stories,¹⁰ log cabin origins, underdog success, beating the odds, overcoming adversity, up by the bootstraps, risk-takers, adventurers — real **heroes** (known for their deeds)¹¹ or “anti-heroes” or **villains** (known for their misdeeds)¹² as opposed to **celebrities** (known for being known).¹³

Invoked by: Andrew Jackson, Abe Lincoln, “Westerns” (e.g., Jesse James, the Sundance Kid, The Lone Ranger), John Glenn (but not most of the other Astronauts), Ross Perot, LBJ (“back to the Perdenalis”), Richard Nixon (“my wife wears a good Republican cloth coat”), Ronald Reagan (from Illinois sportscaster to Hollywood movie star to President of the US), Bill Clinton (“the man from Hope” and “the comeback kid”), Lee Iococca (immigrant who rises to CEO of ‘Big Three’ automobile company). Australia example: Kevin Rudd, whose family was evicted from home, lived in a car, rose to PM.

American examples: The comeback attempt of Michael Jordan; Tiger Woods holding off a late challenge yesterday (17 June) by fellow American Rocco Mediate and sporadic knee pain to win his 14th major title in a nail-biting playoff.

⁸ The first four categories are based on Robert Reich, *Tales of the New America* (1988). The remainder are based on Philip M. Burgess, *New Choices in a Changing America* (1986). The examples are from Burgess some prodding by Elizabeth Bardwell.

⁹ There are also cultural themes that are not widely shared between Americans and Australians (e.g., rebellion, reaction to authority, role of government, civic assertion, secularism, civil rights, equal protection of the laws, etc.), but that is for another discussion.

¹⁰ Alger was a 19th century author of more than 100 “dime novels” recounting rags-to-riches stories celebrating how the down-and-out are able to achieve the American Dream of wealth, success and social standing through hard work, courage, determination, and concern for others.

¹¹ For example, from the mythical King Arthur to John McCain or Ian Thorpe.

¹² For example, from the mythical Wicked Witch of the West or the “Joker” (Heath Ledger) to Hitler or Ned Kelly (depending on your perspective).

¹³ For example, Paris Hilton (everywhere) or Corey Worthington (the “Melbourne party boy”).

*Australian examples*¹⁴: Kevin Rudd, Ned Kelly, Dawn Fraser, Allan Bond, John Bertrand, Dick Smith, Lindsay Fox, Frank Lowy, Paul Hogan, Nerissa Mapes.

2. Rot at the top — e.g., populism, bossism, "decade of greed," term limits for self-serving political elites, shareholder rights movement, "Enronism" and self-serving corporate elites, statism, red tape, "honest graft," etc.

Invoked by: Ross Perot, Bill Clinton the candidate, George Wallace, New Left, FDR, Boone Pickens, Pat Buchanan 1996 campaign re "corporatism" (greedy corporate chieftans sending jobs abroad), Mike Milkin and "junk bonds," "globalism". Australia example: Union leaders against the Big End of town; Graeme Samuel and the ACCC railing against "big oil" (e.g., Fuel Watch).

American examples: Ross Perot's entire Presidential campaign in 1992; Rep. Billy Tauzin (and most other members of Congress) against Kenneth Lay, Jeff Skilling and "Enronism" — greedy corporate chieftans taking care of themselves while leaving shareholders, lenders, and employees to swing in the wind.

Australian examples: the Australian Wheat Board scandal, Tony Mokbel, Opes Prime, Belinda Neal, HIH Insurance.

3. Mob at the gate — e.g., terrorism, immigrants, nativism, Yellow Peril, Communist threat, McCarthyism, Cold War, predatory competitors — such as the Japanese economic threat of the 1980s, immigrants, giant unaccountable corporations.

Invoked by: Richard Nixon, Jerry Brown, Ross Perot, JFK, FDR, US electronics industry CEOs against "predatory trade practices of Japan", etc. Australia example: John Howard.

American examples: George W. Bush and the "evil ones", "evil doers" and the ubiquitous threat of terrorism; Pat Buchanan re immigrants, "globalism" and foreign predators taking our jobs.

Australian examples: Fuel Watch, Tampa Affair, White Australia Policy, the Union movement, Pauline Hanson, Telstra "monopoly" (as stated by our detractors), "Singapore Optus" (as stated by their detractors).

4. Community solidarity — "we have nothing to fear but fear itself," barn-raisings, Habitat for Humanity, togetherness, "it takes a village...", etc.

Invoked by: FDR, LBJ, Lee Iococca, Bill Clinton, the president (we are "family," and his "together" theme in the 1996 State of the Union). Australia example: Qantas commercials.

American examples: George W. Bush and leading national charities calling for Americans to "pull together" and to "help one another" to ease the burdens on the victims of 9/11.

Australian examples: Australian giving to the tsunami cause, bush fire support, the ANZAC spirit, the Surf Lifesaving movement, "I am, you are, we are Australian", mateship.

¹⁴ These Australian examples also reflect contributions by Telstra's Public Policy & Communications team during a group meeting.

Other examples include:

5. Expanding choices: Multiplying choices is one of the most cherished values in American culture. That's why people came here in the first place. The rise of niche markets in everything from magazines to automobiles is clear evidence that people are rejecting one-size-fits-all products and services. Instead, they are demanding more choices, more tailoring, more customizing in everything they do. Many innovations that expand choices in the workplace-lifestyle interface involve new telecommunications technologies: flex time, telecommuting, telework, homeworking and the SOHO (small office/home office) movement, telework business centers, etc.

6. Increasing control: From pollster/political analyst William Schneider¹⁵ to marketer Faith Popcorn,¹⁶ recent books and articles show persuasively that people are seeking more control over their lives — to insulate themselves and their families from violence, out of control politicians, schools that don't work, banks that fail, stock brokers that sell bogus equities, etc. Manifestations: suburbanization, cocooning (e.g., Walkman, VCR, home shopping, iPods), homeworking and the SOHO (small office/home office) movement, home schooling, school vouchers, the “limits movement” in politics (e.g., term limits, taxing and spending limits), increased use of the Initiative & Referendum to take power from legislatures, the “privacy” movement, gated communities, the explosive growth of private security services (i.e., hired police), etc.

7. Increasing convenience: Most products and services are designed to make life easier for people — such as the rise of “labor-saving” devices in the 1950s. In telecommunications, life is made easier and more convenient by connecting people with their world — anytime, anyplace, any way. Remaining connected while moving around is an increasing need of business people and family members alike. It is a workplace and a lifestyle issue at the same time. Remaining connected is a new possibility for human beings. We are just beginning to understand what this means — both the upsides and the downsides. Addressing this theme in balanced ways will communicate with an issue that people increasingly care about.

8. Leaving a legacy

9. Leveling the playing field

10. Expanding opportunities

¹⁵ CNN's leading political analyst, William Schneider writes extensively on politics and public opinion for *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Washington Post* and other publications. On these points, see, for example, “The Suburban Century Begins,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1992, pp. 33-44.

¹⁶ See, for example, Faith Popcorn, *Clicking: 17 Trends That Drive Your Business--And Your Life*, New York: Collins, 1998 or her *The Popcorn Report*, New York: Collins, 1992.

Storytelling Notes

1. **Abstract** language is language of science; **Narrative** is the language of tradition. **Example:** Conversation is typically about people, things, or ideas – what is REALLY the highest form of discourse. Intellectuals say it is “ideas”. In fact, it is “people” and the dramatic tension that gives substance to everyday life.
2. **Communicate naturally** – Story telling is our **native language**, we learn by age 2; **abstract language** we learn at age 8.
3. **Communicate quickly** – holistically, not piece-by-piece, but a gestalt, all at once, in a snap. **Example:** Katoomba, or Port Macquarie, or Telstra Technician re OPEL (“Now they’ll know what shitty really is.”)
4. **Communicate clearly** – make sense of a chaotic world. **Example:** Blackhall, or by example - Live their life, their way, in their time
5. **Communicate collaboratively** – ideas come like bullets in abstract discussions. In stories ideas are more like arm-in-arm – more like a dance than a battle. **Example:** *Ten Canoes* – “...the story is in the telling”.
6. **Communicate persuasively** – get the listener to invent a parallel story. **Example:** Tiwi Island, NBN is the largest infrastructure investment since the Snowy Mountain Scheme
7. **Communicate accurately** – the context is important; globalization loses context. Storytelling provides a context: Blackhall and small business, Gourmet Garden (story told on the Sunshine Coast just after visiting there)
8. **Communicate intuitively** – role of tacit knowledge. In storytelling you tell more than you explicitly know, because it connects with the stories in the heads of the receiver (the achievement of inter-subjective agreement)
9. **Communicate entertainingly** – abstract communications (like the typical PowerPoint) are dull and dry...in part because they are not populated with people – but only ideas and things. **Example:** Coota Boat race and photographers, self-deprecating, life is more than work, appreciate Australia
10. **Communicate movingly** – to get action, start the process of implementation. **Example:** Blackhall – we should be ashamed..., OPEL decision – and no-one said anything...
11. **Communicate feelingly** – way to discuss emotions in culturally sensitive way. **Example:** Brooklyn, Oyster Farmer; Philip Jensen, Soccer Game, Beckham, The Castle
12. **Communicate interactively** – storytelling is inherently interactive, because storyteller sparks a story that listener co-creates in his or her own mind. **Example:** Editorial cartoons. Applications (“Can I order a pizza on it?”), monopoly

13. **Communicate with parables and stories with surprise endings** that make a point.

Examples:

- There's a man, standing on an open, grassy field looking down at an odd-shaped piece of animal skin. He lashes out at it – kicks it with his foot and it sails across the field. With that simple kick, several million people around the world experience intense feelings of joy; millions more feel despair.

This sounds crazy...until we fill in the rest of the picture. The rest of the picture is that the open grassy field is a soccer stadium, the man is David Beckham, and the scene is the final of the World Cup.

Words and actions taken out of context are often meaningless.

Adapted from *The Good Living Guide*,
by Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne,
Matthias Media, p. 9.

- A priest was traveling on an airplane one day when a scientist sat down next to him. The scientist was an astronomer. They introduced themselves and talked for a bit.

As they settled in for the flight, the priest opened his Bible and started reading. At that point scientist/astronomer leaned over to his new friend, the priest, and said, "I like to think that religion can be summed up by the words, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you".

The priest, always a gentleman, replied, "Yes, and I like to think that astronomy can be summed up by the words, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are".

Adapted from "Dawkins's Dilemmas,"
by Melvin Tinker, in *The Briefing*,
October 2006, Issue 337, p. 20.

- **The following is my "Katoomba story"**, a story I have told many times — a story that explains why we decided to take our broadband case to the public. It is a true story. Here is the way I told to the Australian Law Awards dinner in 2006.

"What the lawyer calls a "case", the rest of us call a "story"...For many years, I have worked hard to communicate complex ideas with stories or cases. Let me give you a recent example – from a weekend trip I took to Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.

"You will recall, several months ago, we decided to remove 5,000 or so pay phones from around the country. Pay phone usage has dropped dramatically with the rapid spread of mobile phones. As the automobile made the buggy whip obsolete, **technology often leads to what the**

economists call the “substitution effect” – in this case the substitution of mobile telephony for fixed line telephony, including fixed line payphones.

“Most of the payphones we removed were one of a pair, so at least one remained. Not one of the targeted payphones was a phone supported by Universal Service.

“Still, a lot of **controversy surrounded our decision to remove the payphones**. So, anticipating the controversy, we prepared by demonstrating how shareholders were left holding the bag when uneconomic payphones were kept in place. As part of our public messaging strategy, **we identified five (5) specific payphones (“cases”) that illustrated the problem – and one of those was in Katoomba.**

“A week later, I traveled to Katoomba. When I got off the train, I hailed a taxi. After a few minutes conversation, the cabbie asked, “Where are you from?” Then he asked, “Where do you work?” When I said, “Telstra”, he asked, “You wouldn’t happen to be one of them Three Amigos, would you?”

“When I confirmed I was one of the Three Amigos, he surprised me. Usually the next question is, “What is Sol like in real life?” Instead, he asserted, rather boldly, “I’ve got a bone to pick with you. I’m a Telstra shareholder...and so is my wife. We have 1,600 shares. And you guys are removing payphones here in Katoomba, and a lot of people here in town don’t like it – including my wife and I.”

“After asking me if he could show me the payphones we were removing, he showed me one that I knew about – because it was one of our case studies to illustrate the problem.

“I said to my new friend, “I know about this phone. Do you know that every phone call on that payphone costs \$36.15 – and that is why we are removing it?”

“He replied, “That doesn’t make any difference...the government pays for it.”

“Oh no it doesn’t,” I told him. “You pay for it...and your wife pays for it...and all the other Telstra shareholders pay for it.”

“My cabbie/shareholder friend was quite surprised. After talking about it for several minutes, he said, **“You know, we have some other payphones here in town that you might want to consider removing.”**

I tell that story a lot. Why? Because **it captures so many of the issues that we need our shareholders, opinion leaders, and the general public to understand** – issues related to

- technological change,
- the “substitution effect,”
- shareholder rights,
- the impact of intrusive and value-destroying regulation, and
- government’s propensity to treat Telstra as a “community property” and, in the process, pick the pockets of Telstra shareholders.

We can roll out our White Papers...and the analytical pieces from our economic consultants...and the legal briefs from Mallesons and our staff attorneys...and our PowerPoint slides, but none communicates the essence of the forces driving a complex business decision around payphones the way what we now call “the Katoomba story.”

We have a lot of other stories from our experiences over the past 15 months – and our media and public relations staff are now tuned into looking for stories and how to tell stories to make a point. Why? Because, as Einstein once said, “The world is made up of stories, not atoms.”¹⁷

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¹⁷ I have written several op-ed commentaries on the importance of story-telling in communications in the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, Colorado) and Scripps Howard News Service. For example, see Philip M. Burgess, “Stories Refuel Culture,” (November 25, 1997) and “Family Tales Tell Us Who We Are,” (November 21, 1995).