

# The Storytelling of Science

**I**T all began with a big bang. But let's begin here with history. Our forbears—the enterprising lots—struck two stones together, and what ensued was a spark. They rolled out a wheel. They tamed deadly diseases. They suspended bridges. They scraped through the skies... And today as we stand on the shoulders of these giants, we see glorious horizons beckoning us.

Our scientific know-how and technological advancements stand us in good stead to explore this and the many other worlds that entice us. We see big, but if we look close, we'll see the trail of destruction that has followed us to our vantage point. The reality: our planet is in dire straits. I am a scientist, not an alarmist.

I do science. But what exactly is this thing called science? An empirical, objective, systematic endeavour that strives to make sense of our universe? Yes. But, not just that. Science that stands tall and four-square as the most rational process of enquiry today has presuppositions galore and gnawing ethical quandaries. To wit: Who has seen an orbital? And genetically engineered babies?

Science helps us define and explain transformations; it is a study of transformations. Science transforms our lives; it has, and will continue to do so. But not much attention is given to the transformative power of the storytelling of science.

Call it a thought experiment. Call it scientific imagination. Call it creativity in science. The underlying feature here? Stories. Stories of science. There's a story of Einstein running after a beam of light. There's a story of Kekulé seeing in his mind's eye two snakes joined together mouth-to-tail. There's a story of geodesic domes influencing nanoscience. The takeaways from these stories: the theory of relativity, the structure of benzene, and the naming of fullerenes, respectively.

There's a joy in storytelling. Our ancestors knew this well, and passed onto us as part of their legacy, stories they hoped would sustain us. With time, this passing over of stories mutated into a game of Chinese Whispers. That's the inherent peril of stories. But when done right, stories build hope, construct realities, and most important of all, help us seek meaning.

*The future has an ancient heart.* That's Italo Calvino. I love this sentence because it portrays with conviction and beauty what I think ought to be the central tenet of our lives: a certain permeability. Permeability that enables connections.

*Stories work slowly. They don't need to dazzle; they aren't supernovae. We need stories that celebrate science, and we need narratives that reach the most ancient parts of our hearts. We need stories of science that tell the truth, and we need them to tell it straight. Sometimes with stories an unimaginable grace is possible.*

Connections that seamlessly link us with who we most fundamentally are. And I think stories are these perfect conduits that pull us out of our slumber and sloth, and link us with our truest selves.

These connections are essential. And these connections are not easy. These are akin to connections between solar panels atop a high-rise and a thatched roof on a low valley. To engender these connections, we cannot rest content with received stories, but must tell new stories as they unfold. And tell them with honesty and courage.

We need to tell the story of Cherrapunjee, that Indian town which was once the world's wettest place. Deforestation and global warming have now stripped the town of its honour. We need to tell the story of carcinogens and other adulterants that are unscrupulously added to food products. We need to tell the story of the local college that plants a hundred saplings in its centennial year. And we need to tell the story of the small voice within that doesn't tire of campaigning for waste management and efficient use of resources.

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