

# The Flame of Story

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## Introduction

At times like this, I always recall some good advice from my mother. When I was 11 or 12 years old, and was just about to give a little speech, she told me: “Don’t try to sound wise, charming, or articulate. Just ... be yourself.”

Tonight I want to talk about the wondrous power of story—especially that form of story we call the hero’s journey. But first ... I’d like to give you a few highlights of my personal, truly *un*-heroic, journey as a writer:

As a youngster, I grew up in two marvelous places: a home with an apple orchard in Massachusetts, rich in New England history and crafts; and on a ranch in Colorado, at the foot of Pike’s Peak. Early on, I discovered my urge to share stories—around the campfire, at the dinner table, or in my own ridiculous little magazine called *The Idiot’s Odyssey*. I’d sit under a tree and just scribble away for hours.

In those years, I often hiked and camped, rambling through New England forests and Rocky Mountain meadows so full of color that they seemed like fields of crushed rainbows. And I discovered that *nature* was more than just my favorite playground. It was also my greatest inspiration—as well as my friend, my healer, and my mentor.

My very first manuscript, which I began after college during a year of travels with my backpack around Asia and Africa, was my ticket, I hoped, to a life as a writer. It got a *great reception*: I sent it off to one publisher after another, until I’d sent it to 32 different publishers. And received—you guessed it—32 rejections. Now, rejection letters are not meant to be warm and fuzzy. Or very personal. They simply *hurt*. And I had a big, thick pile of them.

But, to be completely fair, there was one letter in that pile that was truly personal. It treated me with such kindness and dignity that, to this day, I can still quote exactly what it said. It began: “Dear Sir/Madam.” They even took the trouble to circle the word ‘Sir’. So personal! Then the letter continued: “Your work of fiction/nonfiction”—with a circle around ‘fiction’—“does not meet our publishing standards for our Spring/Fall list.” (In that case, they circled *both* Spring and Fall—just to make absolutely *sure* that I didn’t miss the point.)

## **Career Change**

Well, it took me seven years to work up the courage to try again. Despite everything, I still dreamed about being a writer—especially a writer of stories for young people. During those years, I’d often wake up before dawn to write before going to work; I’d scribble in the back of taxis or during long business meetings. (Actually, I was doing character sketches of the secret lives of all those lawyers and bankers in the meeting! So if you’ve ever wondered where I got the inspiration for the trolls, ogres, and goblins in my books ... now you know.)

This time, however, I had two big advantages going for me: First, the unqualified belief of my loving wife, Currie. Second, the encouragement of a truly marvelous writer whom I’d met in a bizarre case of serendipity, and who had, by then, become a dear friend—Madeleine L’Engle. (I’d be happy to tell you that story later, if you like.)

So one fine day I surprised my business partners and quit my job in New York, then moved back to Colorado to see if I could write something that somebody might actually want to read. Well, that was *twenty years ago*—and *twenty-four books ago*. In that time, many more good things have happened than I would ever have believed possible.

Best of all, a family with five wonderful children! All of them, by the way, are named after mountains—which gives us a great excuse to go camping in many remarkable places. As you can see from this picture, there is no playfulness whatsoever in these kids. And no creativity. And absolutely no mischief at all.

Just to give you the full humor of that career change, let me tell you about the day I walked into my office and quit my job. I was president of the company, and it was the very *last* thing my partners and investors expected.

One of the founding partners came up to me, looking very upset. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a beat-up business card and handed it to me. “This is my therapist,” he said earnestly. “Call him—*right now*. Before you jump out a window or something.”

That night I had dinner with Madeleine L’Engle at her apartment on the West Side. In the midst of our conversation, she leaned across the table and declared: “You know, Tom, there are exactly *three essential rules* to writing a *brilliant* novel.” I almost dropped my fork, eager to hear what she’d say next. Then she went on: “Unfortunately, *no one* knows what they are.”

That piece of wisdom sums up everything about the writing experience.

[Tell story of how I met Madeleine L’Engle.]

One last comment about that career change: People sometimes ask me, “Wasn’t it scary to leave a job, move somewhere else, and try to start a new career?” The answer is yes, of course, it’s always a little scary to make any change in life. But those changes were not *nearly* as scary as something else—the idea of growing old, of coming to the end of my life, and wondering, “Why on Earth didn’t I follow my dream?” *That* was a truly terrifying prospect. Much more terrifying than any nightmare! For that’s what life is all about—to *pursue* our deepest dreams, and to *grow* in whatever ways we can. If you look at life that way, it’s much less scary to try and fail ... than *never* to try at all.

If you walk in the direction of your dreams, good things will happen. They might not be what you expected ... but you will have opened the door to serendipity.

## **The Flame**

Now I’d like to turn to the wondrous power that connects us all—the power of *story*. Think of it: Through the magic of story, we can live any life, feel any emotion, travel any distance, know any idea, or make any discovery. It’s truly a kind of *magic*—more powerful than even the magic of Merlin.

I’ve spent a good deal of time searching for just the right metaphor to describe this power:

First I considered the metaphor ... *making music*. That metaphor is close ... but not quite right.

So I've also tried ... *weaving*. Well, that metaphor, too, is close ... but not quite right.

I've also tried ... *planting a seed*. Again, close ... but not quite right.

Then, at last, I found a different metaphor. *Flame*. This metaphor came as a gift, from a man named Nsengi.

You see ... two years ago, I travelled to Africa with my daughter—to Rwanda, home of the world's last surviving mountain gorillas. One night, we happened to meet the man who leads the country's largest national park, devoted to protecting the gorillas and all the other species who live in the rain forest. His name was Nsengi Barakabuyé. As we sat together around a campfire, which crackled and sent sparks spiraling up into the African night, I asked him, "What made you decide to devote your life to conservation? To try to save all these creatures?"

His answer was simple: "Someone who told stories."

"When I was young," he explained, "I was afraid of the forest. Like everyone else in my village, I didn't want to go there. It was a dark place. A scary place."

"Then," he said, "a teacher came to my village. I don't remember her name or where she came from. But I *do* remember her stories. She told us many tales about the forest and its strange and beautiful creatures. She helped us understand. And then she took us for our first walk in the place we had so long feared."

Firelight danced on his face as he said these words: "*I was the tinder ... and she was the match.*" Then he added: "*And I have been on fire ever since.*"

*That* is the power of story. It is an incandescent flame—powerful enough to kindle a person's fires of mind and heart, fires that can keep burning and glowing bright for a *lifetime*. And that flame can sweep across continents, leap over oceans, thrive throughout centuries. It can provide everlasting heat and light.

The flame of story. We need this flame! *Sharing stories is as essential to being human as breathing is to being alive.*

## **The Need**

Today we need stories more than ever. To connect us with our past, to imagine our future, and to unite us with our fellow human beings of every language, color, age, belief, and description.

Stories carry a special virtue: They can enlarge us, stretch us, carry us beyond ourselves and what is merely here and now. They can lift us above whatever forces drag us down: arrogance and greed, divisiveness and ignorance, intolerance and materialism.

Because of these forces, many people—especially young people—feel alienated and powerless. Think about it: Young people are literally bombarded with media messages that are, at best, superficial—and, at worst, demeaning. They are constantly urged to buy things from advertisers who view them as merely a target market—not as our society’s future. The underlying message in this commercial onslaught is: Your worth as a person comes from what you drink, or drive, or wear. *Not who you really are down inside.*

At a deeper level, the problem is this: Too many people have *forgotten* the essential wisdom of thinking about future generations in *everything* we do—of remembering that all of us, young and old, are part of the same, ever-flaming story.

And if we forget our deepest stories—we forget our power. That is why so many young people don’t know, or don’t believe, that they actually do have power. That their choices really matter. And that, if their choices matter, then *they themselves matter.*

We need to help our children know that they are not just “consumers”—that they are, in fact, *creators*. Yes, creators—of their own lives. Their own futures. *Their own stories.*

How, though? How do we convey this elemental spark—and set those young lives aflame?

Through one particular kind of story, found in every culture and place and time throughout history: the hero's journey.

## **The Hero's Journey**

In the long and often arduous walk that we call Life, our heroes are our trail guides. They have taken a similar path, faced similar obstacles, climbed similar mountains. It makes no difference whether those heroes are fictional or real. They show us, by example, just how *far* we can go, just how *high* we can climb. And they show us that every action—no matter how small—can make a difference.

To give youngsters a sense of their own power, I sometimes tell a story about a girl ... and a starfish:

*A girl lived by the sea. Every morning she would walk along the shore, and every morning she would discover something new that the ocean waves had washed up the night before. It might be a beautiful shell, a gnarled piece of driftwood, or a twisted knot of kelp. But one morning, after a great storm at sea, she found starfish—thousands and thousands of starfish. They covered the shore, so many she couldn't take a single step without crushing them. And she knew that those starfish would die very soon—unless they were returned to the water.*

*But how? There were so many of them! The problem was so vast. And she was just one person—and a small person, at that. What could she possibly do that could make a difference?*

*She bent down and picked up one lone starfish. Holding it against the sky, she admired its delicate beauty. Yet what could she possibly do to help these creatures survive?*

*Just then a boy who also lived by the sea came walking by. He saw her holding the starfish, and guessed exactly what she was thinking. He exclaimed: "What? Are you crazy? You can't possibly help! There are just too many. There is no way you can make a difference."*

*What did that girl do? She turned toward the waves and threw the starfish into the sea. It landed with a splash. Then she turned back to the boy and said quietly, "Well ... I made a difference to that one."*

Every action matters. Every starfish matters. Every child matters.

Sometimes I have a heart-to-heart talk with a young person who already understands that each person is a bundle of positive energy, but who is wondering *what to do* with that energy—what to do with his or her life.

In those conversations, I always make two simple requests: First of all, look deep *inside* yourself and ask, “*What do I really love?*” Second, look *outside* yourself and ask, “*What does the world need?*” Then take the answers to those two questions—what you love and what the world needs—and put them together. The result is ... a truly *wonderful* life.

Now, communicating such ideas—lighting such fires—is made much harder because of our celebrity-oriented culture. The truth is—as a society, we are massively confused about *the difference between a hero and a celebrity*. And the difference is enormous: celebrities are about superficial qualities that lead to fame. Heroes, by contrast, are about *deeper* qualities—qualities of *character*, such as courage, compassion, perseverance, and hope.

And unsung heroes are all around us—people of all descriptions who are quietly holding our world together. Not because they want any fame or fortune, but simply because they want to help. They are teachers, librarians, parents, neighbors, and friends—whose courage and compassion, hope and devotion, help young people every single day.

Yet lots of young people don’t understand that. Their fires’ tinder is wet, soaked with self-doubt.

Let me tell you something that happened about 12 years ago, while I was on a book tour, somewhere in Ohio. That day I spoke to a big high school, in the school gym, about all the fictional heroes in my books—ranging from young Merlin to Kate Gordon to a tiny little fellow who becomes the greatest dragon of all times. After my speech, one young woman came up and said, “Your books are okay, I guess. But I know how it *really* works.”

“Oh?” I answered jokingly. “Do tell! I have no idea at all how it really works.”

But she didn’t smile. She merely said, “People like you write all these books about kids who do something special—who save their family, or their town, or even their world. But that stuff only happens in fairy tales! It *never*

happens in the real world.” Then she added: “In the real world, kids don’t mean squat.”

She turned and walked away, leaving me stunned. For the rest of that book tour, and the whole way back to Colorado, I thought about her ... and the many kids like her. And I realized that what those kids need is something stronger than fictional heroes—they need real, live heroes. Young heroes.

That was the day I decided to write a nonfiction book called *The Hero’s Trail*, which profiles over 100 heroic young people from all backgrounds. And then I founded the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes—named after my mother, who was a hero in my own life. Each year, the Prize honors 25 diverse, public-spirited kids who are making a difference. They are all ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and economic circumstances. The winners get a scholarship for their higher education or their service project.

It’s really just a small thing, this prize—but its sole purpose is to turn the *spotlight* on these courageous, outstanding kids ... so their examples might inspire others.

Let me quickly introduce you to a few of our winners:

[Show the trailer for the documentary film *Dream Big*, which profiles 7 diverse winners of the Prize.]

If you’d like to have a free copy of this documentary film and a helpful discussion guide—just pick them up at the back of this auditorium. I hope you will use them with your students ... and light some fires!

## **The Big Idea**

Let’s now focus on one more quality of story, a quality that lies at the very center of its flame: the ability to convey a big idea – a question about what it means to be human, mortal, alive.

All of us have been deeply touched—as well as changed—by the great stories we have encountered. You can’t read those stories without being profoundly affected. For a lifetime—as if we’d been set aflame.



Beyond the sheer beauty of such stories—their rollicking adventures, their poetic language, their unforgettable characters—they have the great gift of a big idea. For the most powerful way to convey an idea is through a story.

Now, *ideas* are certainly *not* to be confused with lessons or sermons. Far from it! I'm talking about rich, subtle, complex ideas – the most enduring moral questions, the most essential elements of being human and alive. Such ideas must be thoroughly, completely embedded in a story, just as an ember is embedded in a campfire.

If an idea or question about life is genuinely embedded—it gives a story richness, depth, and luminosity. And that story's flame will ignite the hearts and minds of readers.

That is why stories cross all the boundaries that we humans too often erect to divide ourselves—boundaries of language or geography, time or culture. And that is also why so many people around the world have shared their most fundamental beliefs and most cherished ideals through stories—Native American tales, Polynesian legends, ancient African stories, fables from India, Greek myths, Chinese lore, Biblical imagery, Celtic ballads, and so many more.

*Shhhh*, listen ... and you can hear the sound of millions of fires crackling.

## **My Own Stories**

You will hear echoes of all these elements in my stories – my own small contributions to the realms of heroes, fantasy, and ideas. A few brief examples:

In *The Lost Years of Merlin*, the first book of the 12-book Merlin Saga, a lone boy washes ashore on a harsh coastline. He is half-drowned, barely alive, so weak he can't even open his eyes to see the seagulls screeching overhead. Then he realizes that he has experienced something even worse than surviving a shipwreck and almost drowning: He has *lost all his memory*. Every last bit of it. So he doesn't know who he is, who his parents were, or where he came from. He doesn't even know *his own name*.

This boy has no home, no identity, no name. Yet he does have *something*: a special quality down inside. Call it courage. Or heroism. Or ... magic. And when (over the next several books) that boy grows more strong and wise, so does his magic—until, at last, he becomes Merlin: the mage of Camelot, the mentor of King Arthur ... and the greatest wizard of all times.

Here is the opening passage of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, as the ancient wizard thinks back to that fateful day he washed ashore:

*If I close my eyes, and breathe to the rolling rhythm of the sea, I can still remember that long-ago day. Harsh, cold, and lifeless it was—as empty of promise as my lungs were empty of air. Since that day, I have seen many others, more than I have the strength left to count. Yet that one day glows brighter than all the rest ... even though it began in darkness.*

*You see ... I was just seven years old on that day I washed ashore.*

The big idea of this story? That all of us, at some point in life, feel washed ashore. And that every child, no matter how lost or alone, has some special magic down inside. Maybe even ... the magic of Merlin.

The Merlin Saga continues ... culminating with *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy. This has been called an epic fantasy, as well as an eco-fable (because of the ideas about the spiritual power of nature and our responsibility to protect it). But I prefer to call it just ... a pretty good story.

And the whole 12-book Merlin Saga now has new covers! The twelfth and final book is an illustrated treasury with the secret backstories of over 200 characters, magical places, and powerful objects. Called *Merlin: The Book of Magic*, this book holds plenty of fun for any friend of Merlin who dares to voyage to his worlds.

Another example is the Kate trilogy: *The Ancient One*, *Heartlight*, and *The Merlin Effect*. In these three tales, my feisty teenage girl Kate Gordon has some rather unusual travels – back in time through a magical redwood tree to find a lost Native American tribe (in *The Ancient One*), out to a distant galaxy (in *Heartlight*), and down to the bottom of the sea guided by ever-singing whales (in *The Merlin Effect*).

The big idea of this trilogy? It's really a question: Are we all *connected* somehow—across time, distance, culture, gender ... and even across species? Young readers won't hear any answers from me. But I hope to inspire them to find those answers for themselves.

Here is an example of that idea in *The Ancient One*: Kate cannot get back to her home in this time unless she truly understands the tree – unless, in fact, she *becomes* the tree. That passage reads:

*As she listened to the low, richly toned voice of the tree, Kate began to hear something else, something even deeper. It was a rushing, coursing sound, like the surge of several rivers. She realized, with a start, that it must be the sound of resins moving through the trunk and limbs of the tree. And, strangely, through her own self as well. Back and forth, in and out, always changing, always the same. This was the sound, Kate realized at last, of the tree itself breathing . . . the sound of life being exchanged for life, breath for breath.*

You will find this sort of underlying idea or question in all my stories, regardless of genre—including the slimmest picture book (such as my tale of what really happened on Easter Island – and what we on the island called Earth can learn from that experience). Or the chapter book *Tree Girl*. Or my big sprawling trilogies – including one about a most unlikely hero, a tiny lizard named Basil who becomes the greatest dragon of all times: *Merlin's Dragon*. This tale reminds us that even the smallest among us are capable of great courage ... and great love. After all, a match is rather tiny—but its flame can light a bonfire.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, let me cast one final spark onto your bonfire of story. It is a small vignette from *The Mirror of Merlin*, Book Four in the Merlin Saga.

In this book, young Merlin bravely goes to the most frightening place on the isle of Fincayra: the Haunted Marsh. There he discovers a magical mirror that just might reveal *his true destiny*. If it doesn't kill him first. When he finally faces the mirror, he finds himself staring at the last thing he ever expected—his elder self. In a cave of glowing crystals, beside a magical harp, he meets *the ancient wizard Merlin*.

Now, this is more than just the meeting of two people—or two times in the life of one person. It is also the meeting of *youthful ideals*, full of anger and frustration—and *ancient wisdom*, tinged with sadness and loss.

Young Merlin is deeply upset because all his highest ideals—everything he’s been trying to do to save his world—seems destined to fail. He wonders what was the point of it all, the point of his life.

Old Merlin, meanwhile, is terribly sad about all he has lost in his many years—his home, his dearest friends, his life’s true love. And yet ... there is still a spark of something else in his eye. Something like *hope*.

He reaches out his big, wrinkled hand and places it on the young man’s shoulder. Then he says: “*Know this, young wizard. Camelot, our beloved realm, may fail to last. Yet even so, it may still survive—not as a place, but as an idea. For it may yet find a home ... in the heart.*”

He pauses, peering straight into the young man’s eyes, then adds: “*A life—whether seamstress or poet, farmer or king—is measured not by its length ... but by the worth of its deeds, and the power of its dreams.*”

\* \* \*

Thank you all for doing so much—to *spread* the precious sparks of stories.

To *kindle* the fires of young people’s minds and hearts.

To *fan* the flames that can light many a darkened place ... and even warm the heart of a hero.

*Cherish* those flames.

And burn bright!