

THE WOLVERINE & THE MERCENARY

BY ROB COPPOLILLO

“Just follow the fucking wolverine!”

After two mini-epics on a long, challenging skintrack, the examiner hit his limit. The candidate in front, fatigued and stressed after a long day, had been following wolverine tracks on the way to a hut. Twice the candidate had diverged from the wolverine’s uptrack and twice it had resulted in kick turns and bushwhacking. At the last steep pitch before a warm fire and bed, the candidate paused to decide if he should follow the wolverine ... or go his own way.

And the examiner snapped. Just follow the fucking wolverine!

I’ve heard Colin Zacharias tell this story a couple times and it always gets a laugh. We’ve all been there—tired and epic’ing as the student or as a teacher, frustrated after watching the errors pile up.

Colin’s story checks a lot of boxes—emotions we can all relate to, an adventurous setting, and of course a snappy climax with a funny punch line to drive home the point.

The point, too, is important for any up-and-coming ski guide: a good skintrack uses the terrain to make the journey comfortable and easy for clients. A good story, told well, always trumps a long-winded or dry explanation. Right?

NINETY-EIGHT PERCENT

Here’s a little test. It will only take two minutes of your time and 98-percent of us will return similar answers. Go to YouTube and search for **Heider-Simmel Animation**. The first hit should be a grainy, black-and-white frame with simple shapes on it. Don’t read the caption or comments and don’t skip ahead in this article or you’ll ruin the test!

The instructions are simple (good for the guides out there). Click and watch the 1:32 video and when it’s done, either in your head or with pen on piece of paper, describe what happened in the video. Easy.



OK—welcome back. What’d you come up with? Something about several “people” engaged in some dynamic involving between them? A family or even a love triangle?! You’re not alone. Almost everyone—about 98-percent of participants—impose some sort of narrative on the animation.

Heider and Simmel, academics at Smith College, conducted the original test in 1944, while studying “causal attribution;” that is, how our brain figures out why things happen. Their research showed that human brains reflexively impose a narrative—a story—on things it perceives.

Decades after the Heider-Simmel experiments, Dr. Michael Gazzaniga performed brain experiments of his own at California Polytechnic Institute. Gazzaniga’s original research focused on “split-brain patients,” or those people whose brains, through either injury or illness, have lost the ability to communicate between left and right hemispheres. Gazzaniga’s experiments eventually identified structures in the left frontal lobe that he, and his collaborators, called “**the interpreter.**”

(Of note, the interpreter research helped Dr. Gary Klein develop the pre-mortem test in his career!)

The interpreter works constantly, taking observations from the environment and trying to make sense of them. It wants to figure out why things happen or put another way—how phenomena in the past account for what’s happening now. The interpreter constructs a story that explains what’s going on around us, whether we want it to or not.

STORIES

Years later, Colin’s wolverine story sticks with me. It reminds me to use terrain well, to my advantage. Instead of trying to recall some acronym or a set of bullet points on track setting, I just repeat my mantra, “Follow the wolverine!”

It’s a great story—it’s funny, it captures a more complex topic, and most important, it was told by an expert practitioner with his student’s best interest in mind.

But what happens when a person doesn’t have your best interests at heart? What if they’re trying to dupe you? Or, in a less pernicious but potentially worse scenario, the storyteller is off base, mistaken, or clueless?

Our brains hunger for stories. They can’t help it, so if the story is BS or propaganda or ill-intentioned, we’re in trouble.

“We believe because we want to, not because anyone made us,” writes Dr. Maria Konnikova in *Confidence Game: Why We Fall for it Every Time*.

Konnikova holds a PhD in cognitive psychology from Columbia University and studies high-stakes decision-making. In *Confidence*, she continues, “Our need to believe, to embrace things that explain our world, is as pervasive as it is strong. Given the right cues, we’re willing to go along with just about anything and put our confidence in just about anyone... For our minds are built for stories. We crave them, and, when there aren’t ready ones available, we create them.”

Now you see where I’m going with this?

CON (WO)MEN

I started tinkering with this idea a couple years ago. I happened to be reading *Confidence* one winter and after reading an avalanche incident report, it occurred to me that many of these accidents involve the team telling itself a story.

A nanosecond after that little light bulb went off, I began remembering all the stories I’ve told myself... and my guests. What happens when the “expert” in the group, or the loudest voice in the room, or the “best skier” in the bunch, tells us a story? What happens when I tell myself a story?



Our guests, employees, and less experienced ski partners are all primed to believe our stories. This isn't politics or propaganda; most of our stories in the avalanche patch are told to share info, make sense of the situation, or help a friend/colleague/client. But what if we're wrong about the story's underlying assumptions? What if we become the "mark" in our own con game?

MERCENARIES

Dr. Jonathan Gottschall researches stories. How we use them, how they function in society, where they let us down.

Interviewed for a Harvard Business Review podcast, Gottschall explains, "...stories aren't good. They just aren't. Stories are just powerful. I think it's better to think of the force of storytelling as a mercenary that sells itself just as eagerly to the bad guys."

Gottschall researches and writes at Washington & Jefferson College. His books include *The Story Paradox: How Our Love of Storytelling Builds Societies and Tears them Down*, and *The Storytelling Animal*.

He describes the power and salience of stories, while cautioning about the awesome responsibility a storyteller has. He gives example after example of stories gone terribly wrong—from conspiracy theory-minded mass shooters to propagandists to con men. Stories, he argues, are amoral; neither bad nor good, they're just powerful.

AND?

So what are we to do? Certainly we can't eschew stories in our personal and professional lives. The last thing the avalanche world needs is another acronym or bulleted list or PowerPoint, so I'm sticking with stories and you should, too.

What to do about our stories that miss the mark, though? How do we know when we've strayed from storyteller to con man or propagandist?

I'll propose a few solutions here, but like so much research on bias and (misapplied) heuristics, it's tricky business realizing when our storytelling is going off the rails. Maybe one of my suggestions will ring true, but more likely, you'll have to generate some answers specific to your organization and particular teaching/guiding/BS'ing style.

Teams. For so many decision-making pitfalls, the answer is a solid, high-performing team. There's an unbelievable amount of research on teams, but they should be diverse and collaborative. Different backgrounds—gender, socioeconomics, ethnicity, professional—get as much diversity as you can within your teams.

Gottschall says, "It's very very easy to poke holes in the other guy's [story] We're really good at doing that. It's really easy for us. What's difficult is to pay attention to our own, to be suspicious of our own."

Good teammates backstop your thinking and double-check your decisions. It's invaluable... but only if you're communicating. Speak up when somebody's story doesn't add up.

Candor. Dr. Amy Edmonson is a Harvard Business School professor and originally used the term "psychological safety" to describe what she now calls "candor." Simply put, if teammates don't feel comfortable speaking up, the team is going to suffer.

Edmonson began studying teams in hospitals and to her surprise, high-performing teams reported making more mistakes, rather than lower-performing teams. Some digging in the data, though, and it was clear—the high-performing teams were simply more comfortable making, discussing, and fixing mistakes. It only seemed like they were failing more often.

Make sure you and your teammates are comfortable sharing ideas and second-guessing one another, without shame or heckling. For me, one of

Our brains make sense of the world around us by telling stories.

Tired, overwhelmed, or biased and they'll settle for a merely plausible one. If we can slow down, collaborate, and debias our teams, we can tell ourselves a true story. Colin Zacharias searching for the truth with a team of students in the Ymir backcountry, British Columbia.

■ ROB COPPOLILLO

the reddest red-flags is the teammate who's never wrong. Beware the skier/patroller/guide with only answers, never questions.

How to know if there's productive candor on your team? Do you regularly hear people being interrupted? Keep track of how much each teammate speaks during meetings—high-performing teams tend to have roughly equal parts communications amongst teammates. If one person, or a few, dominate the conversation, you might have a problem.

Debias. Remember your debiasing tools—the devil's advocate, pre-mortem, and adopting a mindset—incorporate these into your workflow ... and use them!

Effort. Remember Kahneman's systems 1 and 2—system 2 requires effort. Distinguishing between a poignant story and a piece of simplistic propaganda requires effort. One reason conspiracy theories take hold is they are emotional. They're just plausible enough that they appeal to an emotional desire in the listener to explain something (confirmation bias). Standing atop 1000m of untracked blower, our minds want a story to drop in—make sure you put in the effort to debunk the conspiracy theory with evidence. Evidence-based decision-making appeals to system 2, the effortful, slow system. Use it but learn how to choose and weight the most important data so your feet don't get cold.

CONCLUSIONS

Woh, that was a really long-winded way of saying don't BS yourself and your team.

Follow that wolverine, my friends, just make sure you keep that furry little mercenary on your side. Stories offer us a fantastic opportunity to teach, inspire, and entertain... but they are fraught. ●

RESOURCES

The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for it Every Time; Konnikova, Maria; Penguin 2016

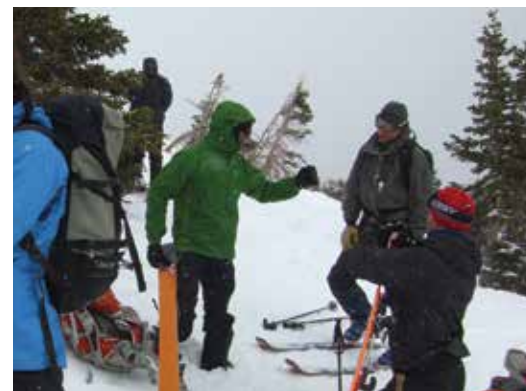
Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes; Konnikova, Maria; Penguin 2013

The Story Paradox: How Our Love of Storytelling Builds Societies and Tears Them Down; Gottschall, Jonathan; Basic Books 2021

Tales from Both Sides of the Brain: A Life in Neuroscience; Gazzaniga, Michael; Ecco 2011

Is there a better storyteller than Timmy O'Neill (in green)? Professional climber and smack-talker, TimmyO can weave a tale, no doubt. Luckily for those around him, he has everybody's best interest at heart!

■ ROB COPPOLILLO



ROB COPPOLILLO writes and guides from his home base in West Seattle. He and his wife, Rebecca, have 13-year-old twin boys and two dogs. His book, *The Ski Guide Manual*, is available online, at REI, and of course, at Amazon. He calls his life's greatest achievement not getting covid at this year's ISSW.