

Transformative Vision: What Don Quixote Tells Us About the Future

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I don't know how to lecture, much less in English, so I googled it. On the TED website it says "We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world." The power of ideas. Oh good, I have lots of THOSE.

I'm here to talk about narrative. Narratives matter. Narratives are important. Narratives can change the world. Take a couple of minutes right now to think of the first book you read that really moved you. [PAUSE] Now I'd like you to take 30 seconds to talk to the person next to you about it. Look, I'm two minutes in and already started doing activities.

This is why narrative is so important:

- Studies on unity & diversity reveal that narratives are important cohesive elements to drive social action
- Narratives are meaningful tools for patient care in medicine
- In business, fostering positive self-narratives is a key strategy in developing the leadership potential of the workforce
- Psychologically, narrative is essential to the development of self-consciousness
- History is narrative, and we see all around us today how competing narratives can problematize our understandings of history even given primary text documents from a given time period

Narrative is essential to the way we envision our world and our selves. So to highlight this, I'm going to talk about one of the most important books ever written: don Quixote. Best-selling work of fiction of all time and one of the most widely translated books of all time. Among many other things, it was featured in an episode of Quantum Leap, innumerable musicals, seven ballets, has an asteroid named after a character in it, multiple video games inspired by it and, according to an article in the New Republic, even a Danish pornographic adaptation from the 60s. There is no way to overstate the impact it had on the world, literature, the arts, pretty much everything.

So let's talk for a minute about where this book came from, about Cervantes and his world and the world of don Quijote. We're in the middle of the Spanish Inquisition, the reign of Felipe IV. The book was written in two parts: the first in 1605, and the second in 1615. It was immediately popular and a guy named Avellaneda wrote an apocryphal second part in 1614, which angered Cervantes and prompted him to write his own second part the following year. We are a little over a hundred years after the major events of 1492: besides the whole Columbus thing, and the publication of the first Spanish grammar, there was the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain. In between the publication of the first and second parts, in 1609 Spain expelled all the moriscos and converts to Christianity whose families had been allowed to remain in 1492. This was a time of great censorship, when there were many banned books, including Bibles.

Talk about plot. What it is essentially about, main characters and how they get their names, a couple of episodes:

- windmills, because well yeah.
- helmet of mambrino, the episode with the Basque, yangueses, friars, sheep
- episodes that challenge hegemony (Marcela, Ricote, and his daughter), that it is written and translated by moors
- the Duke and Duchess and making fun of DQ
- how he dies and everyone else has been “infected” by his vision

You might say, “But Dr. Garr.... only a madman would do the things he does.” But the story of DQ isn’t the story of a madman. He’s not insane (“I know who I am” and other clues to ambiguity of his mental state). What DQ has is TRANSFORMATIVE vision. He doesn’t see things that aren’t there; he TRANSFORMS them by seeing them newly or putting them in a new context. We encourage the kind of vision DQ has (and we should)

Here’s an example: when my son was five or six, he invented a thing he called TANTS. He said it was pants with a table attached to the top so you could set your drink or food down on it and walk around with it. Of course, there is the obvious problem—how do you sit down?? It turns out that this kind of invention is an actual thing. It’s called CHINDOGU in Japanese, inventions that solve one problem but are completely impractical or cause another problem. The concept was invented by Kenji Kawakami for his magazine Mail Order Life (see slides for examples). There have been international competitions offering scholarships to young people, there is even an International Chindogu Society.

- Tim Moore from Idea Champions said “The point is to keep exercising the mental muscle that crosses wires, tries absurd combinations, and associates the previously unassociated.”
- It is related to the Japanese idea of kaizen or continuous improvement, but author Max McKeown points out that “Kaizen seeks to improve stuff we buy, while Chindôgu seeks to improve stuff we think”

The kind of whimsical, creative vision that creates these off-the-wall objects is the same kind of vision that takes HUGE BANK OF COMPUTERS and turns it into MACBOOK AIR, MACBOOK AIR IN ENVELOPE; or that takes HUGE BANK OF COMPUTERS PLUS OLD TELEPHONE and turns it into *HOLD UP CELL PHONE*.

This object is MARVELOUS. Here I hold the entire accumulated knowledge of humankind since prehistory (and I use it to snapchat pictures of dinner and watch cat videos).

And we need knowledge. The type of transformative vision I’m describing is BASED ON KNOWLEDGE. Don Quixote was a READER first and foremost, and sought to apply the lessons he learned from reading onto a world he saw as innoble and unjust. Sometimes, like with Marcela, he succeeded. Sometimes, like when he attacked a puppet show, not so much. Sometimes, like when he freed a bunch of criminals sentenced to the galeotes, the answer is more complicated—they were indeed not innocent men, but they had been sentenced to extremely cruel and unusual punishment for whatever crime they’d committed, as the galeotes inevitably led to death after a few short years of shocking conditions and extremely hard labor.

The future: DQ teaches us the value of SEEING things not just as they are, but how they could be, even when that vision seems wild and crazy to everyone else. Think of Disney, Einstein, Picasso. Look around

at your world and ask yourself: is it noble? is it just? do people use their strength to defend those who cannot defend themselves? do people use their words to build bridges or to tear people down? Are the giants we face as a society supernatural creatures impossible to defeat, or are they manmade constructions that we can control? If they are “impossible to defeat,” are we brave enough to try anyway? The Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland said she believes in six impossible things before breakfast every day. What did you do this morning? Are you willing to tackle what everyone else says is impossible?

Be like Don Quixote. Because if we’ve learned anything from this 400 year old book, it’s the power of stories. Use your vision to transform the world and write a new story for the future.