

HIPPOCRATIC OATH FOR STORYTELLERS

by Johan Liedgren

A transcript of my Valedictory speech at *Chennai Storytelling Festival 2018* at Loyola College, in Chennai, India, on 11 Feb 2018.

I write and direct films. I write about story and work with narrative structures as a tool. My work is not academic in nature, I am not that clever. I am like most of you - fighting in the trenches. The daily search for what makes a particular story work. Trying to squeeze blood out of a stone. It's real work. Hats off to all of you who get up in the morning and work the arts. The sincere arts.

I have been thinking. I know those of you who attended my seminar earlier might find that a little hard to believe. But I have.

And I think we need a -

Hippocratic Oath for Storytellers

You already know what the Hippocratic Oath is. The oath that doctors have been swearing for 2400 years. Do no harm, to help when you can... to your best ability and judgement... to enter a house for the benefit of the sick, not for money or sexual favors... And the doctor back in the day would swear to uphold these principles before long list of important Gods. It was real, and it was serious.

Back then, it was also a way for the sincere doctor to stand out from those who were in it only to make money.

Other profession and institutions around the world also have oaths, creeds, codes or ethics: soldiers. lawyers, elected officials, justice, priests, journalists...

What do these professions have in common? By society they are considered:

- Important
- Wielding power
- Susceptible to Corruption

Let's put us storytellers in that context.

Is what we do important?

Story and narrative is how we define ourselves, how we know where belong, where we are headed - and how we make sense of the world around us. So, yes - it doesn't get more important than that.

Do story-tellers wield real powers over others?

We lure with stories impossible to ignore, we ask irreversible questions never asked before and paint new brave possibilities in the minds and imaginations of audiences. We create new narratives of what can be agency.

So yes, we hold great powers over others. Check!

Are we susceptible to corruption?

All stories require an audience. They crave attention - desperately - to earn back all that money, time and production required. Or simply to feed the storyteller.

This has always been the case; the work running the risk of being made to cater first to just that: attention and money. And even more so today, where many stories we think matter are industrial in scale and audience. As is the scale of temptation that comes with it; to focus too much on the glimmer. Or to protect ourselves from the lack thereof.

So yes, storytelling easily fills the criteria for being in need of an oath.

With that; I ask you to consider this:

OATH FOR STORYTELLERS

I, the storyteller, swear (insert deity of choice) to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:...

1. To treat my story-work as sacred and an art of important to the real world.
2. To work and regard story work as a profession, not merely a trade.
3. To value the stories I create by the greatness it can inspire in others - not by my own fame, attention or money.
4. To never forget that story is art as well as structure - that universality and commonality in structure will need my full heart and inspiration to be brought to life.
5. To not shy away from great story because subject-matter is controversial, complex or subtle.
6. To apply my craft for story, not preaching - because all art is specific and abstract in nature.
7. To never consider my story complete or as only my own - because a story told, is only half of a story; the other half is created by the audience's imagination.

And lastly -

8. To always seek the brave and original. Because story should aim to change and always challenge status quo. There is no story without conflict.

So help me (insert more deities).

Fear and Beauty

I cannot tell you what stories you should tell. Or what what a good story is. That is not my job, nor the goal of the oath.

The oath is there to help remind us of the importance of our work. Of the ethical obligations that come with work critical to humanity. That come working with great powers.

With great powers come great responsibilities.

And as such we have to guard against story becoming a tool for commerce rather than a tool for good.

Story should never be a pet monkey kept for entertainment.

Not a court jester - but rather a full member of the king's round-table.

Story should not be allowed to grow into a fat and lazy indoor cat.

Story should be a wild feline. A jaguar... revered for its elusiveness and mysterious beauty.

But also feared.

Feared for its supreme ability to hunt and kill.

Thank you.

Johan Liedgren

johan@liedgren.com
www.liedgren.com

