

The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness

with Michael Dowd + 56 Experts



Winning the Story Wars by Calling People to Greatness

with Jonah Sachs

Big ideas from this session:

- The Story of Stuff, The Meatrix, and other socially responsible, eco-friendly viral videos
- Modern-day myth makers: deficiency marketing vs. empowerment marketing
- How social media tools are driving a return to the oral tradition

Michael: Well, Jonah, it's a treat to see you again, and I'm delighted to invite you to be part of this series and that you're able to be part of this series on The Future is Calling Us to Greatness.

Jonah: Great to be here, Michael. I love the work that you do, so I'm glad to be part of it.

Michael: Well, I love the work you do, too, brother, as you know. The last time that we were together we had breakfast at the Al Gore event in Chicago, as you were a keynote speaker sort of to get the whole group jazzed about the stories that we tell and how to really focus on inspiring people with a vision of their greatness or a vision of being the hero in their own story in service to this life giving future.

What I've been doing at the beginning is just inviting all of my guests in this series to help us get who you are. Share what you're best known for, what you're most passionate about. This is not a time to be bashful. Really help us get you, and take as long as you want.

Jonah: Well, I've been an entrepreneur and designer and a storyteller since about 1999, when I was thinking about what to do out of college, just out. I was thinking about how the world was changing and the urgency of kind of solving some of these crises that we are facing even more now than we were back in 1999, and looking for some hope.

I didn't really want to just go kind of nibble at the edges of these problems. I was living in DC where I could have worked for a nonprofit and just sort of try to help out, but I was looking for what's going to really change the world here. I thought at that moment I was starting to get these pass along emails from friends, where people would pass along a chain letter essentially through email.

It hit me, and one of my best friends growing up from childhood, Louis Fox, it hit us both that the means of creating media and ideas was falling into the hands of everyone. What people were most likely to want to pass along was stuff that they were actually passionate about and stuff that they really cared about, connected to their values, and that the stranglehold that sneaker ads and hamburger ads had on our mindshare was going to loosen up and that what was urgent was that people who had an inspiring message for change learn how to harness and use these tools.

So we started a little company to try to do that, to try to help social change marketers get heard. One of the first ways we found of getting this passed along was making little movies. This was back in the day before there was sound, before anything really kind of happened. Moving on the screen was a big deal. We put out these little movies and found that hundreds of thousands of people would pass them along.

Then I kind of faced a problem, which was clients wanted more and more of this, but I wasn't sure why certain things went viral and other things didn't. What's interesting about working with the crowd and democratizing media is it's got to be good. You don't have that chance to just say, "You must watch this," like we did in the old days.

I started looking for patterns, why certain things work and other things not. That's where I realized that it wasn't just about the quality of the design or the quality of the humor or the acting that you put into your videos. It was really about the story that you were telling. I became interested in what is this story thing and how does it work.

I started studying all the way back to ancient mythology and discovered Joseph Campbell and ultimately became known not just for the viral videos that we've done, like Story of Stuff or The Meatrix, but for this book that I wrote, *Winning the Story Wars*, which is all about how marketers can change the world, basically, by using ancient story techniques and modern technology. That's where I am.

Michael: That's great. That's great, a little overview. In fact, since you mentioned just at the end, and I thought it was one of the best books I've read in a long time, share a little bit about the thesis of *Winning the Story Wars*. I think the subtitle is *Why Those Who Tell and Live the Best Stories Will Rule the Future*.

Jonah: Yes. That's not actually derived from a Plato quote, because I didn't know the quote at the time, but his quote was, "He who tells the stories will rule the world." That is really true in so many ways. The stories that we tell and internalize and live by are really the stories that tell us what's important and what's not, how to spend our time, what to invest in, oftentimes what to die for.

Stories really hold tribes together. They hold people together. The thesis of the book is kind of twofold. One is about the urgency of the moment now, because we live in a time, in what I call a myth gap, a time when the old meaning stories don't really make sense anymore. A lot of the old religious stories are in question.

We've become one of the first societies ever not to completely believe in our meaning stories, in our myths. A lot of people think we have no myths, but in my studies, I've found that marketers have become our modern day myth makers. Everyone knows and lives by these brand stories that we hear all the time, whether it's the cigarettes that people smoke or the clothes they wear and the cars they drive.

That's how we form tribes and stories now. Our marketers are giving us these stories that keep telling us, "You suck. Without your favorite product, you're nothing." We wonder why people are so unengaged and not happy. It has worked to get consumerism off the charts. It's gone from kind of a thrift based society, a Puritan work ethic kind of society, to consume at all costs society. That worked.

But it hasn't given us the meaning and purpose that we need to survive on this planet. So believe it or not, I was surprised even to have read a book about advertising, like, "How did I find myself here?" But believe it or not, advertising is one of the ways that we actually can fix the world, by stop telling people that they're not good enough, by stop telling them that, "You're a consumer," by stop telling them that you can kind of create your personality by the products that you buy.

Stop telling them that they're weak, but call them to greatness through the way that we market and advertise. That's part of it. The second part is just to understand that it's not just social good that you're doing when you change the way that you speak to people, but that in this new world that I call the digital era, which is kind of like a return to oral tradition societies where everyone owns ideas, makes them their own, passes them along.

In this sort of new landscape, you'd better tell stories or your message is going to die. So really trying to get businesses and organizations to realize that you can do a service to the world by doing what I call empowerment marketing, making people believe that they can reach for their deepest values, and we see it in lots of campaigns now, more and more, now that we're in this new digital era.

I'm hoping some marketers will read it and leave their really bad jobs and try to set out to do something better.

Michael: Well, I know that it's made a difference, I don't know at that scale, but I've talked to and, of course, recommended your book to practically every marketer that I've come in touch with since I read it a couple of years ago and suggested that this inadequacy marketing, that something is wrong, and therefore you need our product or our service to be right.

Then the way you bring it not just Joseph Campbell, but also Maslow and the whole sense of human—this call to greatness, this call to be of heroic service, this call to find where your joy and the world's needs intersect and then pursue that edge. I'm curious, do you have any stories about people who have read your book or who have gone this path and what has opened up for them?

To what degree are you aware of what difference your book has made so far? Do you have any stories to share on that?

Jonah: Yes, definitely. I have received calls and also client contracts with people who say, "Okay, we get it." It's audience as hero and it's not brand as hero. How do we create audience as hero? Whether that's Greenpeace, who is saying, "Look, we're a \$250 million organization," [08:02] trying to change the world, but we keep telling people that we're the hero of the story.

That's maybe not giving them the power they need, so how do we change that and work with them to change that way of communicating? So companies like—we're working with even Microsoft or Autodesk who are thinking about—you know, the big software companies—where they're thinking about, "How do our tools really change the world?"

I continually get calls from marketing functions and CEOs who say, "I think I was trying to do something like this, but this is crystallizing for me what we need to do." So it has opened up the doors to some great clients for us. I think the other way that I measure my impact—and, of course, it's very hard to know how we're changing the world when changing the world is such a big task and happens in emergent ways, not in a straight line.

But the number of companies that have been founded by creatives who have either watched a Free Range video or read my book and said, "You know what, I don't have to have that trade off between doing what I believe in and doing my commercial art and just kind of making money," has been astounding.

When we first started this company, people would ask, "Who is your competition?" We're like, "There is nobody who does what we do." Now there are really

hundreds of people. I hear from people all the time who say, “It was seeing something that you did or reading your book that got me to believe it was possible.”

I think that that message, that it can be done, here’s how to do it, and now that I’m about to turn 40 and I’m not 23 anymore, that’s actually more important to me than making great stuff. I can’t stay on the cutting edge of viral technology and media, but I hopefully can inspire the next generation to do it.

Michael: Yes. Beautiful. Well said. Well, Jonah, I’m curious. What allows you to wake up on a day by day, week by week basis and do the work that you do in the face of some really scary stuff? What I often tell audiences is if you haven’t shed at least a tear or two or gotten angry or gotten really overwhelmed or depressed, you really haven’t been paying attention.

There’s just a lot of scary stuff out there. So how do you stay inspired on a regular basis to do the work you do?

Jonah: It’s interesting, in teaching *The Hero’s Journey*, which I kind of feel just privileged to be part of that movement, one of those people who has taken this insight from Campbell and tried to bring it to the world. There are many like me out there. One of the critiques that I get often is trying to go out and tell everybody that they can be a hero in their own life is not true.

The world is not like that. You can’t be a hero in your own life. What can one person really do? Aren’t we just making people more depressed when they realize that they can’t do it? There’s no good in basically saying that recycling is going to stop climate change or drive a Prius and the world is going to be a better place.

What keeps me going and I think that keeps me believing that you can inspire people to be heroes in a meaningful way is that we are living in a time where everybody’s contribution can have such an enormous ripple effect. We don’t have to be sort of like toiling in our own little box and our own little silo.

What we do impacts and affects people everywhere. I’m not some technophile optimist where technology is going to save the world, but I have to say that—let’s take our interaction. I saw you do a reading, and I fell in love with your book *Thank God for Evolution*. That probably would have been the end of it.

But then you read my book, and I think you contacted me on Twitter. Now there’s a channel by which authors and readers can contact each other and talk. We’ve struck up a relationship and worked to amplify each other’s work. What I’m doing now I know has some impact. I think it’s like that with everybody.

Everybody has a platform and an opportunity to add something positive to the world. I think we do have to be very strategic. We can't waste our time doing things or just say, "Well, I'm doing something good, so that's enough." We have to think about how we're doing it. But I get up out of bed every day because I feel like I'm one of those nodes in this network of people who are giving their all.

I have two little kids. Of course, it terrifies me to think that the world might not be a hospitable place for them. But I can't imagine going to my grave thinking, "Well, we didn't succeed, so I wasted all my time." If we don't succeed and I die, I'll be glad that I spent all this time trying to do the right thing and help the world become a better place.

I do keep in mind, and this is maybe a little bit a controversial point of view, but I keep in mind—you might be familiar with this—that in prophecy and scripture every generation has a need to believe that they're the last generation. We see that time and again, this sort of end of the world prophecy, and this is the end of times and of days.

Even though we have a lot more science to back up that we're getting to that edge, I also think it's part of the human condition to believe that we're on the brink, and then we often find a way to move beyond that brink. I think something in the psychology of wanting to believe that we're the last generation holds us in a place of complacency.

A bit of optimism and a bit of hope is certainly what's needed at this point, even though I'm a realist. The other day I saw—I've been working on a project that has really been digging into some of the numbers and looking at how can we possibly get by with nine billion people on the planet. The numbers don't work very well.

Then suddenly it's like, "Oh, by the way, we just upgraded the peak population number to 10.9 billion," so it's another two billion people you're just throwing in the mix. Suddenly all that work trying to calculate the possibilities gets thrown out the window. We get bad news every day, but we have to keep working.

Michael: Yes. No, exactly. The first person that I interviewed in this entire series back at the end of March was John Michael Greer, who is one of the world's experts in both peak oil and the rise and fall of civilizations. I remember reading something of his. He's actually my favorite author these days. I've read eight of his books in the last year and a half.

His Archdruid Report I read every Wednesday aloud to Connie. But one of the things he talks about is the two mythologies that keep people from being in action. One is the myth of the apocalypse. There's no need to be in action if the whole thing is going to hell in a hand basket. The other is the myth of perpetual progress.

There's no need to be in action if things are just going to keep getting better and better, regardless of what I do. Steering clear of those two mythologies with a sense that—an analogy that I like a lot when I talk to audiences, they call it the butterfly effect in chaos theory. But a small change in the system over here can ripple out in totally unpredictable ways, in a large scale way over here, you know, the whole idea of butterflies' wings in Hong Kong can affect the weather in New York.

I say let's just pretend that you only significantly impact in a major life changing way three people in your life. Now, you'll actually impact hundreds. But let's just pretend three people. Each of those people goes on to significantly impact only three people. But one of them goes on to significantly impact 30 million people who wouldn't have been impacted had you not made your little difference over here.

There's no way that we can predict or understand that, so if we all just follow that place where our joy and the world's needs intersect, our joy and the future's needs intersect, with our gifts and limitations. What I sometimes say is the universe needs your shortcomings. We don't have to get our act together and be perfect before we can be of service.

This is another place where I've found your work and Free Range Studios, the work that you've done with others. You mentioned the Story of Stuff and The Meatrix and some of the other videos that you've created that have really gone viral with a social message, with an earthy message, with a message about what I call right relationship to reality, which is a secular way of saying getting right with God, getting right with reality.

You also mentioned earlier Greenpeace, and I wanted to just follow up that, because two of the other people that I interviewed in this series were people that had a big role in Greenpeace and then have gone on to do this incredible climate work. One is Amy Larkin. Her book, *Environmental Debt*, I thought it was just absolutely fabulous.

She's got her nature means business paradigm, that basically no nature, no business. She summed it up as sort of three sort of core principles in this nature means business model. One is that the long view must come into being. We can no longer take this quarterly profit or just this year, but the long view must guide all decision making and sense of profits or sense of progress and that sort of thing.

Another is that we can no longer allow the free or subsidized polluting of the commons. The fact that corporations can get wealthy by toxifying the air, water, soil, and life upon which we all depend is collective incentive. We can't allow that anymore. The third is that government has a role to play in catalyzing clean energy technology and in limiting the pollution, because, of course, the earth has a limited—the air, water, soil, and life is a limited sink for our toxins.

Those three things I've found to be simple. Amy Larkin was somebody that worked with Greenpeace and has gone on to do great things. Another one is Paul Gilding, author of *The Great Disruption*. I remember reading Tom Friedman a couple years ago saying that if you only read one book on climate change, make it Paul Gilding.

These are people that are out there sort of, as you were saying, taking their gifts in light of their own limitations and doing what they can to call other people to greatness, which is what this whole series is about. There's sort of an off the wall question that I've been asking all my guests. I purposely don't let you know about it ahead of time, just so that you can sort of like, oh, wow, think about it.

That is that if you had the opportunity, Jonah, of inviting any three people in history to a dinner party where the three of them and you are there, so all four of you are together, or perhaps a one on one where you have a beer or a meal or take a hike with any three people in history and have a conversation, who would those three people—and assuming that they're sort of instantaneous translation.

So there's not the language barrier. Who would those three people be, and why would you choose them?

Jonah: All right. Give me a moment on this one. [18:31].

Michael: Yes, I know, tomorrow morning you wake up with something else in mind, but that's fine, too.

Jonah: I've got a couple. I just want to make sure I've got three here. All right, so I'm really interested in people who see the ideas of the moment that no one else can see and synthesize on a tremendous amount of information, where the synthesis hasn't begun yet. I would probably start—I wish I could dig deeper to go further back in history.

But I would probably start with Charles Darwin and just say, "How does one," and I'm not sure he'd be able to answer this question, but, "How does one see reality in an entirely new way?" To me, and I know you'll appreciate this, but it's like the moment that human beings became aware of the system that created them is a milestone in the evolution of the universe.

That idea is one of the most powerful ideas probably that's ever been created by a human being. To be around that brain—I just understand that he was a very generous, interesting, accessible person, so that would be very fascinating. The second would be the guy I write about quite a bit in my book and is kind of an enemy of empowerment marketing.

It would be Edward Bernays, who is Freud's nephew, who invented inadequacy marketing. Basically he figured out how to use story telling and human values in advertising to create the consumer society that we live in. I've seen some interviews with him, and he was like 80 or 90 years old, sort of looking back on his career.

You do see a man who was not entirely fulfilled, because I think he knew that he missed that one piece, which was the heart piece of it all. He really was able to manipulate and engineer society, but it wasn't connected truly to his deepest values. One thing that I admire about what those guys did, those early marketers, advertisers, did is they faced a pretty similar situation to what we face right now but in a different way.

World War II was ending, and in the paradigm that they were living in there was a tragedy coming, which was economic collapse might happen because there wasn't enough consumption happening. We had these giant war machines and who was going to buy the stuff they were producing. I think you can sympathize with them when they saw that the Great Depression had led to all this nationalism, had led to world wars.

They're like, "We have to reengineer society to get people to live in a different way." Now, they had a starting assumption, which was that people are pretty stupid, and you have to manipulate them, and you have to force—you have to trick them, basically. But what they did was they said, "It will be safer if people work out their aggressions in the supermarket and shopping mall than on the battlefield, so how do we do that?"

They reengineered society. They did it in a generation and a half. If they could do that, maybe we could do it, too. They had the titans of industry behind them. But I've been working with some billionaires in Silicon Valley who are 28 years old. They're the titans of industry today, and they're not the Rockefellers and the Carnegies who had to step on a million people to get to the top and rig the earth to get to where they're going.

These are young kids who can do the same thing, but they're fresh. They're values based. So I'd like to find out from Bernays, "What are the steps that you took to get to where you got to?" Then in that same theme of sort of seeing what no one else could see, I've recently read a little children's book about Rachel Carson to my kids.

I just read a biography of Rachel Carson to my kids, of Rachel Carson to my children. We were all crying by the end. Again, it's just sort of like how does somebody look at the world around them and just see what no one is really seeing in a way that just lights up [22:25]. Talk about one person inspiring a whole movement.

It was a humble enough discovery and point of view that she took, but it was enough to catalyze what everyone was thinking. Campbell said when we hear these great stories, it's more like we're remembering than learning something new. I feel like many of these thinkers

and the contribution that we can make is to sort of give that gift to people, of that, “Oh, yes, that’s what I’ve been thinking, but I didn’t know how to say it.”

I think Rachel Carson really did that. There was a deep discomfort at the time with how we were treating the earth and our relationship to it, and she gave people permission and the framework to think about it. I’d love to just sort of talk to her about what’s next. Yes, those are three people that hopefully would enjoy spending a little time with me.

Michael: Yes. Well, that’s great. If it was a dinner party, I’d like to be invited also, because that list is good. One of the things that I wanted to ask you in terms of your own children, when you look at them and you imagine—how old are your kids now?

Jonah: They’re six and four.

Michael: Six and four. Okay. So when you look at them and imagine the world that they have to live in, and then you talk to other—I’m imagining that you end up talking sometimes to teenagers and twenty-somethings. Yes, let’s stick with sort of the 18 to 30 crowd. Let’s say you’ve got a young person, or maybe even a teenager, who is just overwhelmed with the challenges.

They’ve been paying attention. They feel fear. They feel some anger. What would your coaching be? What would you offer to a young person who is feeling overwhelmed with the challenges that we’re facing as a species right now?

Jonah: First of all, I would coach anybody in this case to take on some level of spiritual approach to this, just in that—there’s that Buddhist quote about the—now I’m fading. You can edit this part out. The fact that the reality in nature changes all the time, that the wheel of life turns all the time, so that we may see reality in all of its forms, and this attachment that we might have to stability and to safety is grasping onto an illusion that we can’t really have.

Human beings have faced this since the beginning of time. Now, we may not have faced the destruction of our whole species, although we certainly have at times. But safety and security and predictability is just not a gift that we’ve ever really been given, and we may have been raised in a world where it feels like that’s the case and we get thrown out and realize that the world and the future is not safe.

That’s just something you eventually have to breathe through and get right with in a spiritual way and recognize that this is the canvas of the world we’re living in. If you can start to accept that first, and then be absolutely determined to shape it in whatever way you can so that it is fit for human life and fit for the lives of other species and that we can protect this great gift that we’ve been given.

That's our life's work. So you've been given a life's work, a canvas, and a palette on which to work with. This is not the only planet in the universe, that has life on it, I believe. This is our experiment and our attempts to create something beautiful. We've been given a huge challenge and also a huge amount of tools to work with it.

I do think you need a little bit of attachment if you are holding on so tight to this childish view that we can create a utopia or create a steady state. That's very painful. I do also believe—I've been reading Jared Diamond's book, *The World Before Yesterday*. There are certain things about the time that we live in.

It's far less violent. It's far more secure. We can travel to any point of the globe without being killed, which he considers a miracle, the fact that a passport can allow you to go into other people's territories. We should take each moment and recognize in each moment the health and the resources that we have access to and be really grateful for the fact that today is a wonderful time to be alive and do everything we can to make sure tomorrow will be, too.

There you go. It's a lifelong assignment. I do think that a little bit of that perspective is key before you start working.

Michael: Yes. I'm glad you brought that up. One of the things, when Connie and I do our programs on sort of the sacred side of science, the most common comment that we get after our programs—the main program I'm doing this year is *The Future is Calling Us to Greatness*, the same title as this series. People will come up—just last night somebody did the same thing.

They said, "I've never heard it quite put the way you've just done, yet I've always known it's true." It goes back to what you were saying earlier. It's our nature. Well, on the other end—go ahead.

Jonah: [27:19]. I just recently read the founding story of Greenpeace by Bob Hunter, one of the great founders and heroes of the Greenpeace movement. What those guys did, they were really guided by a seventies spiritual pretty new age kind of point of view and a real heart centered place where for one thing they wanted to do, they wanted to stop killing whales.

They did not have a good plan to stop killing whales. Their only plan—the Russians and the Japanese were killing 35,000 whales a year. They were going to go extinct. They had a couple inflatable boats and an old fishing boat. They didn't say to themselves, "Well, I'm going to figure out the theory of change by which we will stop whaling."

They said, "Let's get out there. Let's put ourselves between the whale and the harpoon. Let's let the whale see what's going on here. If we save three whales' lives"—they had a spiritual connection to these whales—"If we save three whales' lives it will be worth that trip." They went on that horrendous trip out into the North Pacific to confront these boats.

The first year they did save three whales. The next year they saved about 15 whales. Within 10 years, the number of whales killed was about 95% less than when they started, and that continues to this day, and whales have been saved. They didn't know how it was going to get to that point, but they awoken the world to this problem.

It's maybe not as complex a problem as climate change. But how could five people working in a little office with no money save the whales? You know what? They did. So I do think that you have to have that approach of following your heart into things that matter to you and believing that that can have an impact and recognize that perhaps it won't. But what an adventure they had even if they hadn't saved all the whales.

Michael: Yes. Amen. Well, on the other end of the spectrum, somebody in their senior years, maybe somebody who is retired or certainly over 50, maybe over 60, who is wanting to be of service—really, they're very legacy conscious right now. What would your coaching be to them?

Jonah: I think that—this may be an obvious answer, but we certainly need the people to share their wisdom, and people who have lived, have long perspective, lived a long life, need to be able to tell those stories and share those stories. I heard something that I just thought was so interesting, which is that children ask to hear stories again and again and again.

If you have a child, they'd probably watch *The Lion King* 100 times if you let them. That is genetically programmed into them, to hear the same story for whatever reason. They have a preference for that. Elderly people have a preference for telling the same story again. There's actually some thought that there might actually be a reason for this.

Michael: Yes. Yes.

Jonah: A parent could leave their kids when they went to work or hunt or gather or whatever, and the kids would get exactly what they needed, which is the same story told again and again and again. So I thought that was pretty hilarious. But I think it is a natural and needed function in society, especially when parents are so frazzled and stressed, that older people are needed to inspire younger people and to give them a sense of peace and calm and perspective.

That is one thing. I also think that older people are still taken very seriously in the political realm. They vote a lot. They're blocks of people who move in similar ways, and politicians are very aware of what elderly people are doing.

When you talk about some of the other interviews that you had that we need to think about how corporate profits—people are allowed to profit from the destruction of the commons, about how

we think about planetary limits, all those things, that comes down to not people deciding to consume differently, that just comes down to what our laws and rules are.

As long as our democracy is broken in the way that it is, we'll never get the common sense, reality based rules that you're talking about. I think that older people can have the time, potentially, if they're not working as hard as younger people are, and the perspective to have more influence on the political process.

Sometimes that means just showing up at a town hall or working on a ballot measure, and sometimes that means influencing a large group of people around you to become more of a voting block. But I think older people need to help fix our democracy in big ways.

Michael: Yes. Yes. Amen. Well, on that note, I want to just recommend the one author—actually, there were a few authors. But the major author that I was not able to get to be part of this series because her book just came out and her schedule is completely packed for the next few months is Naomi Kline. I just want to go on record recommending to you and recommending to anybody *This Changes Everything* by Naomi Kline.

The subtitle is *Capitalism Versus the Climate*, and it's all about the politics of global warming. It's one of the most inspiring and invigorating books that I've read in a decade or two, so I highly recommend it. Well, Jonah, thank you so much. If people go more deeply into your ideas, obviously your book, *Winning the Story Wars*. Where else would you recommend that they go?

Jonah: They can check out FreeRange.com or look at our stuff on YouTube. But, yes, the book is a great place to start.

Michael: Cool. Great. Well, Jonah, blessings. Thank you so much for being part of this. Next time we're out in California I'll be sure to let you know ahead of time and we'll get together.

Jonah: Sure. I'd love to. I'd love to connect. Thanks, Michael. Bye.