

Reframing Community Messages through Myths and Metaphors

By Susan Nall Bales, *FrameWorks Institute*

Introduction

Progressive advocates spend precious time and thought studying and countering opposition *policy positions*, but rarely does that analysis extend to a systematic analysis of the opposition's *rhetoric*. And, while numerous communications how-to books tell advocates to be careful about message development, few tell them exactly how to think about developing messages that resonate with real people. This paper attempts to help advocates understand the context in which ideas are heard, understood and interpreted by ordinary people.

Recent research in the cognitive sciences demonstrates that language is not a direct transfer of ideas from one person to another. The old, rational model is this: The speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the idea/objects out of the word/containers. (Lakoff et al). Instead, your way of talking about, conceiving, and even experiencing your situation (is) metaphorically structured (Lakoff et al). And those metaphors are more than mere language; they structure thought. The public may think about a social problem in a way that disputes the expert evidence, but you can be sure that people continue to reason according to this erroneous model, and to reason systematically, until a more compelling model displaces the faulty one. To change opinion, these social scientists tell us, we must first change the frameworks of reasoning that are in operation. We must reframe.

Myths and metaphors, parables and paradigms are the way that real people process information and experience to make sense of the world. Reframing involves, in part, understanding the context of the discussion, the models of interpretation and finding new ways to reconfigure the story. It means more than conveying strings of facts--it means adding them up into a big picture.

Brandeis political scientist and former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich says that all American politics and public debate are based on the same stories we tell and retell one another about our lives together in America; some are based on fact, some in fiction, but most lie in between...These parables are rooted in the central experiences of American history: the flight from an older culture, the rejection of central authority and aristocratic privileges, the lure of the unspoiled frontier, the struggles for social equality (Reich, Robert B., *The Four Parables of American Politics*, in *The Resurgent Liberal and Other Unfashionable Prophecies*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

Reich identifies these four parables as:

1. The Rot at the Top, or stories of corruption in high places and conspiracies against the public;
2. The Triumphant Individual, or hard work pays off more than class privilege;

3. The Benign Community of neighbors helping each other; and
4. The Mob at the Gates, or how the society is coming apart from an excess of democratic permissiveness.

Everyone has a favorite variation, but the basic theme is the same, says Reich, and speaks to the essence of our national self-image: Ours is a nation of humble, immigrant origins, built out of nothing, and into greatness through hard work; generous to those in need, those who cannot make it on their own; a longer among nations, suspicious of foreign entanglements, but willing to stand up against tyranny; and forever vigilant against corruption and special privilege...The American morality tale...permeates *both* American conservatism and American liberalism.

The art of political rhetoric, Reich concludes, has been to reconfigure these stories in a manner that affirms and amplifies the changes already occurring in the way Americans tell the tales.

Too often advocates frame their message with the facts but not the parables. However, if the facts don't fit the discussion as it is currently structured, the facts will be denied. The fact that welfare reform may not cost any less or may not work at all, for example, rarely dissuades focus groups from endorsing the concept, as long as they get to reward work and punish irresponsibility. This should lead strategists to question whether welfare reform is really about the things we think it's about (saving money) or about something else (rewarding work). In this case, as in many others, the truth becomes irrelevant to the debate for many Americans.

Public interest advocates can learn to evoke these myths in ways that resonate just as powerfully with a broad spectrum of the American public, but trigger progressive, not reactionary responses.

"Indeed," speculates Reich, "it is just possible that Americans already are telling one another (new)..stories, and are only waiting for a new set of political leaders to give them voice."

This paper proposes that we take mythbuilding and mythbusting seriously by applying it to our message development and media tactics. What this means in practice is that arguments on a variety of topics--from alcohol licensing and arts education to neighborhood safety and housing policy --can and should be examined in terms of the four parables. It means we are not done with our homework until we've translated our facts into meanings and examined these against those of the opposition. Are we conveying a coherent vision of the world (a framework) to the public, are we drawing on lessons and metaphors they know and understand, are we explaining how a progressive position connects to basic American values?

Here's a very practical way to integrate the lessons of this paper into the ongoing work of community-based advocates. Before any public document is distributed--from newsletter to news release--examine it for its underlying myths and metaphors. Before any public action--from news conference to demonstration or testimony--examine your position to make sure your reframe really advances the public policies you promote.

This paper provides greater detail about the four parables, how they play out in the current political debate, how to reconfigure them and how to incorporate them into a media advocacy toolbox.

I. The Myths We Tell Ourselves

Myths are the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world. The sheer volume of information--acquired from news, anecdote, Internet, education, work--with which humans must contend today requires filtering devices to create meaning from the mound of randomness.

This necessary translation from facts to archetypes often surprises advocates, who aspire to be truth-tellers, to bust negative stereotypes by proving once and for all, for example, that programs targeted for extinction really work or that moving people from welfare to work is more complex than cutting off benefits.

And yet every branch of social science refers to this process of translation from micro-fact to mega-meaning in the human processing of information.

For example, from cognitive anthropology we learn that all peoples organize their culture's beliefs and values according to mental models or cultural models. The term mental model refers to a simplified representation of the world that allows one to interpret observations, generate novel inferences, and solve problems.. This concept derives from prior studies of learning, perception, and problem solving...In the process of learning, people do not just add new information to a loose accumulation of facts in their heads. Rather, like scientists theorizing, they construct mental models that make sense of most of what they see. Then people can use these models to solve problems or make inferences, based on seemingly incomplete information... (Kempton et al).

This is a dynamic, not a passive, process-- a rage for order in which the average American makes meaning constantly from the information presented by attaching new information to existing interpretations of how the world works. . (T)hey actively construct models, possibly building from snippets of popularly reported science or from local wisdom of friends and family. And their ultimate test of a model is practical --- whether it works to explain everyday life." (Kempton et al).

Some call them folk models--the ways real people transmit information apart from experts. In other cultures, we call them myths, stories passed from person to person which, regardless of its objective truth, capture something culturally or symbolically significant. to borrow Levi-Strauss's definition. Some call them paradigms, others call them frames. Robert Reich calls them parables; other researchers refer to metaphors we live by. And, while they may be wrong according to the experts, they exist because they continue to work to explain everyday life. They organize facts into meaning. And they do so with an efficiency and a systematicness that allow us to return to our daily lives.

Myths are those things that Joseph Campbell tells us about on PBS when he's talking about ancient Greeks, right? Make no mistake, they're harder to recognize in our own culture. What are these mental and cultural models, these myths that so influence the way we interpret experience and information? How do we recognize them, challenge them, reconfigure them to tell new stories? How can we do this within our own ethical constraints--with a dedication to the truth as we know it and as we advocate for sound policies built on realism?

II. Four Parables of American Politics

Editorial pages overflow with worries and suggestions, writes Reich. Political candidates brandish new ideas. Economists diligently tally th costs and benefits of the various proposals. Congressional committees hold hearings. Television documentaries present experts pontificating from behind desks. Disagreeing specialists abuse each other for the edification and entertainment of the populace at large. Public opinion, as measured

in the latest poll, swings to and fro. This is what we take for public discourse.

But in the background B disguised, unarticulated B are the myth-based morality tales that determine when we declare a fact to be a problem, how policy choices are characterized, how the debate is framed. These are the unchallenged subtexts of political discourse.

To challenge the subtexts, we must first understand the framework we are up against. Reich identifies these four themes in shorthand: *rot at the top, the triumphant individual, the benevolent community, and the mob at the gates*. Following are a series of examples drawn by this author from the context of current political rhetoric.

(1) Rot at the Top. Corruption in high places, conspiracy against the public by the rich, by business, by government officials, by any elite or privileged group.

Examples:

pointy-headed intellectuals B George Wallace

sick liberals C Rush Limbaugh

Big Government

Big business

Big tobacco

Gun manufacturers

Uncompassionate conservatives

Media purveyors of violence

(2) The Triumphant Individual. Horatio Alger. This is a key component of the American dream. The little person who works hard will be rewarded. Work matters more than class privilege. Anyone can make it in America through hard work and perseverance.

rugged individualism

the log cabin myth

Horatio Alger: pluck and luck

the entrepreneur

the cowboy

Bill Gates

Colin Powell

the exception that proves the rule

(3) The Benevolent Community. Neighbors and friends helping one another. Connectedness. Common values.

veterans

doctors and teachers

barn-raising

student loans

public libraries, public schools

volunteering

civil society

being a buttinsky

(4) The Mob at the Gates. Social disintegration lurks constantly just below the surface of democracy, from an excess of permissiveness. We must impose discipline or values lest the rabble overrun us.

all newly minted rights groups

gays in the military

affirmative action

immigrants

welfare recipients

unfettered corporations

the underclass

well-heeled lobbyists

teenagers

bad parents

special interests

IV. Myths in the Market of Ideas

These four myths resonate with our internal chords, and our sense of ourselves as individuals and as a nation. Each of the myths is capable of being used--and abused--in our political discourse. Each can be used as a negative, to explain why the country is going to hell--or as positive, to explain what we have to draw upon to fight an identified foe.

To understand how these myths are manipulated for political ends, let's take a look at the way libertarian and progressive positions translate into Reich's parables. For libertarians, the rot at the top is clearly government; for progressives, it is unfettered corporate interests. And libertarians have made enormous strides in recent years in redefining the rot according to their parable, replacing big business with big government.

For libertarians, the triumphant individual is the centerpiece of their critique. If we remove regulations from the individual, s/he will succeed. School choice is predicated on this premise, as is welfare reform and the anti-affirmative action backlash. The self-made millionaire, the rags-to-riches sports or movie star--these are extremely visible icons of our popular culture.

For progressives, this is a hard pill to swallow. The triumphant individual is made possible by social supports--by schools that work, by family-friendly policies, by environmental protections that ensure healthy communities, by social justice remedies that allow children to triumph over environments that derail achievement. No man is an island, progressives retort to the Marlboro Man.

The myth of the triumphant individual can include the helping hand from a responsive government, as when Colin Powell acknowledges that his ascent would not have been possible without affirmative action. And free-marketeer Phil Gramm bears mute but powerful testimony to a career built on a government-provided ladder of scholarships, state supported schools, even the federal health care system which shelters him and his family.

But it is the myth of the Benevolent Community that is most in need of refurbishing by progressives. Not only doesn't the word government evoke positive images, but neither does the word public. At risk, then, of reform then, in the guise of diminished funding are public libraries, public schools, public parks, public broadcasting, public funding of elections...the list goes on and on.

But community still resonates, and resonates strongly. In a recent study of public values around quality of life and community health concerns, DYG Inc. found "the emergence of public recognition that one's own health is somehow related to the health of one's neighbors; suggesting that perhaps, the most practical approach for pursuing a healthier life is the pursuit of a healthier community...While Americans recognize that the tension between community and individual needs is an important problem...in the long run, if the public is given the time and opportunity to deliberate, then resolution will favor the needs of the community as a whole; already (more than half) of the public believes that substantial sacrifices will be necessary to get the country back on the right track."

In truth, the frontier wasn't really a series of lone wolves triumphing individually; it was full of quilting bees and barn raisings. And this memory of communal life--when you knew your neighbor and they went to bat for you, took your kids in after school and helped you when you were down--persists alongside the triumphant individual with equal force.

The myth of the Benevolent Community goes back, way back, to deep roots of mutual help and support. Not merely to private acts of kindness, but to communities of interest banded together to promote and advocate the common good. In progressive parlance, the Benevolent Community is about using responsive government as a bulwark against the excesses of unrestrained marketplace by:

- exercising public restraint against private greed in health, worker, consumer, environmental protection
- protecting the national security against outside or inside oppression
- helping individuals achieve through economic and racial justice
- meeting the community's obligation to those in need

The triumphant individual, although a cornerstone concept in our culture, is not all powerful. When put up against other fundamental values, like our responsibility as stewards of the environment, the triumphant individual is trumped by deeper values. For example, three-quarters of the public were willing to force change in lifestyles in order to protect the environment, a view that seems to override American values of liberty and freedom, in research conducted by Kempton et al. Moreover, this position was upheld across a wide range of the political spectrum.

You shouldn't force people to change their lifestyle for the sake of the environment.

Agreeing:

Public...27% Dry cleaners...13% Sawmill workers...41%

Perhaps nowhere is the conflict between these two parables more evident than in the news coverage and interpretation of the Oklahoma City bombing and subsequent hate crimes. Here, in numerous retellings of a story, the triumphant individual came up against the benevolent community and the excesses of individualism and anti-government rhetoric were revealed as threatening to the community and the country. The mob at the gates was transformed momentarily from foreign threats to our own home-grown extremism: not only the militia and neo-nazis, but the extremists and true believers in our midst, spreading hatred and threatening the peace and stability of communities.

What America experienced in the aftermath of the Oklahoma bombing was a true vision of the Benevolent Community coming together in mutual support: black and white together, government and voluntary community groups, young and old.

It was moving. And it remains a model of how to challenge the libertarian vision that America is only about isolated individual striving in the marketplace, motivated solely by greed and self-interest. In fact, it has much to offer those who would try to explain the attractions and challenges of community to the American people.

V. How to Play With the Parables

Let's take a look at the recent health care reform debate in terms of the four parables. How did the Clinton administration and other reformers attempt to frame the issue, and how did the anti-reformers talk back? Here's a simple diagram outlining the major arguments:

Health Care Reform

	Reformers	Anti-Reformers
Rot at the top:	Medical establishment Insurers	Big government
Triumphant Individual:	Gets health security	Gets to see own doctor
Benevolent Community:	Sacrifices some benefits so all can be covered	Circles the wagons so that what we've worked hard to get isn't lost
Mob at the gates:	Doctors' greed insatiable needs of insatiable needs of aging boomers (Enemy is us)	Welfare mothers, immigrants eroding resources needed for earned Medicare (Enemy is them)

At a training session several years ago at Consumers Union, advocates split into two groups and organized fictitious campaigns, for and against health care reform, around the four parables. What they found was nothing short of a revelation to many veteran policy and communication professionals. The opposition had all the energy. What is remarkable from the above schematic is the difference in emotional value between the two positions. If you join the reformers, you may lose something you have in favor of something you don't quite understand but you get to do good for others (something good will happen). If you join the anti-reformers, you get to keep what you've got and nothing bad will happen. A sort of vague goodness is at war here with the fear of losing ground. All the emotion except altruism weighs in favor of the anti-reformers.

What is sorely missing from both arguments is any notion of having solved a problem. This, as the research conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation predicted, was a big obstacle for health reformers. The prescription to give up something in order to accomplish a larger goal only works if the problem or spur to action is very real. In focus groups and surveys, Public Agenda Foundation researchers found that "Many Americans are badly confused about the extent and causes of the health care cost problem...The American public believes that the country's health care system is riddled with waste and greed. Consequently, they are not eager to talk about hard choices, or to consider solutions that will increase their own costs or reduce the services they get. Nor are they ready to relinquish the services they get...The political debate on health care reform has leaped ahead of the public's current level of understanding." In this confused state, Americans are more than ever vulnerable to the cynical manipulation of myth and metaphor.

Finally, one of the big draw-backs in the reformers' argument is that the enemy is us and our doctors. This is a very difficult idea to sell. Few Americans believe that they personally overuse or abuse the health care system. Few Americans understand the aging of the population as a contributing force to health care costs. And few Americans believe their own doctor to be part of a problem. Thus, their own direct experience of the health care system undercuts the reformers' argument. By placing the blame on the other or on an it, the anti-reformers make personal sacrifice irrelevant to the discussion.

At a warm-up to the health care reform wars, survey research experts and political strategists from both sides gathered to discuss what would transpire over the course of the debate. Robert Blendon, a reform strategist, discussed how threatened Americans felt by their lack of health care security and how strongly they felt about the need to make sure everyone got coverage (health care is a right, not a privilege). It was a clear signal to the opposition of the prominence of the benign community in reformist positioning. Asked how he would counter these arguments, anti-reform strategist William McInturff responded that he would run ads showing long lines at the post office, with the simple message: is this the kind of health care system you want? From the beginning, the anti-reformers were organizing their strategy around a combination of the rot at the top and the mob at the gates. Was the promise of security enough to overcome resistance to change and the risk of chaos? Evidently not.

VI. Mythbusting and Parable Realignment

Does language really matter? Does it matter as much as the truth?

(I)n politics, words do matter, says columnist Robert Samuelson writing recently of the Republicans' use of the word revolution. They help create a climate of opinion. The abuse of language subverts reasoned debate. Exaggeration, simplification and distortion are normal parts of political debate. But the more these excesses are compounded, the harder discussion becomes (Washington Post, 1/3/96).

Linguistic research confirms Samuelson's assertion that language structures thought. Ideas that do not fit into the metaphors we have accepted to structure our lives are rejected out of hand. Your way of talking about, conceiving, and even experiencing your situation (is) metaphorically structured, conclude George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Metaphors, myths and parables filter out aspects of the argument that don't fit, and organize new information to fit a model that is familiar to us and reflects our basic cultural values.

Too often advocates talk back armed with the facts but not the parables. If the facts don't fit the discussion as it is currently structured, the facts will be denied.

When the Public Agenda Foundation confronted focus group participants with statistics about the numbers of children in poverty, low-birth weights and inadequate health-care, those participants interpreted the data as indicating an inability to take advantage of existing services, rather than a lack of services. Hence, the problem of children's lack of access to health care was transformed into another problem--a lack of parental responsibility and motivation.

Reich tells us to counter debates like this one not with a barrage of facts but with a cultural coherence that draws basic American values into play. For each libertarian position, he suggests, there is an equally valid and deeply held progressive position, rooted in our collective myths and history.

Isn't this contradictory? Yes.

No one said public opinion has to be consistent. No one said that people cannot hold two opposing ideas with equal force.

In essence, the art of political rhetoric comes in using one myth to trump another. Each myth reconfigures experience and realigns opinion with a different set of core values. The trump occurs when one myth is so powerful that it shuts the other out of the frame.

For example, when the Carnegie Commission released its landmark study *Zero to Three*, it chose to frame its findings as we know what works with respect to getting children off to a good start. This frame, while not one of the four parables cited by Reich, is a common American metaphor that connotes our scientific superiority, our inventiveness, the ultimate triumph of human ingenuity over adversity, our ability to make or manufacture solutions. This is a powerful American self-concept. However, Senator Kassebaum, attending the announcement of the findings, deflected its power by trumping it with an even more powerful core value: personal responsibility. If you know what works for children, tell their parents, she said. Children are the responsibility (the property, in the old agrarian frame) of their parents. They are not a problem to be solved by the state.

VI. New Recipes for Advocacy

Reich's four parables are a short-hand for message development. In a best case scenario, a community group would have the luxury of focus groups, polling data, media effects experiments, and other research to guide message development. But in the real world, we all know that an issue crops up and demands an instant response. The four parables provide a way to brainstorm the position you want to adopt, and to anticipate the opposition.

On any given issue, you can do this easily by breaking your staff into two groups: progressives and libertarians, or community advocates and community critics, or whatever polarization you see in your community news coverage and politics. Give each one a half hour to compose a news conference statement of no more than one page that captures the argument from that perspective, using the four parables of American politics. Let each group present its case, and debrief by discussing the most compelling arguments. You may want to use a worksheet with a short definition of the four parables to help groups organize their arguments.

Here are some questions you will want to ask after the presentations:

- How well do the arguments build on basic American values?
- How will average Americans connect this issue to things they already believe?
- How does the language of each position build on the way real Americans describe the issue?
- Do the facts that are used to counter the opposition have meaning, do they add up to a coherent vision?
- How will each side trump the opposition?
- Which side has the most emotion on its side?
- Where are the vulnerabilities on each side?

While you may not be able to control the whole article or news segment, you can always control your soundbite, by giving the news media a compelling, original statement that explains an issue in a new way to ordinary people. And, if you have created relationships with your local media, you can use your brainstorming session to suggest a more coherent story to a reporter. Of course, the myths will be almost invisible in a really good story, just part of the framework that allows people to connect your position to basic American values.

Storytelling just got more complicated, advocates will say. But now there are new tools to help decipher and decode the opposition's stories. Use them to reframe the debate and take back the power of metaphor, myth and meaning. For community advocates, the challenge will come in giving

language, voice and vision to the idea of the benevolent community. Advocating the good society requires that we do our homework.

Resources

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