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Facebook's Story Change: Life's Not a Narrative

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, September 29th, 2011

“Once upon a time...” the storyteller says, and we lean forward. We all love being held in a master storyteller's hands; we love it because it is easier to listen to a story than to tell one.

That's why Facebook's new format raises some intriguing questions. At the top of the page, where it used to say “News,” it now says “Stories.” I can choose between seeing “Top Stories Since My Last Visit” (right now, there are 11 of them) or “37 More Recent Stories.”

All of these “Stories” string together in Facebook's new profile function, [Timeline](#). With Timeline, all of your Facebook posts will flow together in chronological order. “Tell the story of your life,” Facebook promises in its introductory video.

If only it were that easy.

Storytelling's hard work because, as every writer knows, you have to know where you're going: Plan your character's end – then build toward that. For instance, when we're working on a movie we always start with the third act. Lots of screenwriters can come up with great beginnings, but few can craft a killer third act.

This is especially true when the main character dies. For such a story, the storyteller must build toward the character's demise with a sense of narrative push – and leave some other characters alive in the aftermath, continuing characters whose lives will be changed, for better or worse, by the death, and who will go on.

After all, the story's being told to us, the living. We may have identified with the main character, but if the main character dies, we have to go on too. We listen to stories of death because they promise to give some meaning to our lives.

A life is lived forwards, but its story is told in reverse. Just as, in writing a good sentence, an author builds the words logically, with foreknowledge how the sentence must complete, until the words close the sentence at its necessary end, with a period.

Random words don't make a sentence, and haphazard events don't make a life's story.

The problem, of course, is that just as arbitrary events don't constitute a story, our Facebook posts don't tell our life stories either, for two reasons.

First, we don't put everything on Facebook. We have privacy issues (especially with the [new changes](#); here's how to take better [control of your privacy settings](#)), we don't want advertisers to know all our habits, some things we only share with certain people, and after all, we spend our lives *living life*, not creating content for Facebook's pages. Facebook posts are, at best, a random and anecdotal selection of a few things we experience. They may or may not be important. We often don't know what's important until well past the event.

Which brings us to the second reason Facebook posts can't be a story. We don't know how or when we'll die. The Greek poet Solon counseled, "Count no man happy until he is dead," and he was right; we can't know how to tell the story of a life until it is over.

We may get some attention on Facebook, but we don't get narrative.

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