

The Power of Observation

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Perhaps the single most common question I get is this: Where do your story ideas come from? How do you come up with the things you write about? I have to be honest: I'm not sure I can answer that question. I've thought about it extensively but have yet to come up with a satisfactory answer. "They just come to me" isn't good enough. So after a great deal of thought I've come up with a two-part answer, one of which I've already addressed in a prior post, so I'll deal with that one first. Ready?

Read.

That's right, read. Anything and everything. To prepare for this post I kept an inventory of the things I've read in the last ten days, and I am going to list them here so that you understand the breadth of my sources of ideas. Here you go:

- At least one newspaper every day: the Burlington Free Press when I'm home; the local newspaper when I'm traveling. In the last ten days I read the Mexican national newspaper for four of them, Canada's Globe and Mail for two, and the Boston Globe for two.
- A host of magazines: two issues of the Economist, two issues of Business Week, one issue of Foreign Policy, five photography magazines, one issue of the Atlantic, four articles from the McKinsey Quarterly, an HBR article on leadership, and a Mexican magazine about the Latin America marketplace.
- A number of books: Edmund O. Wilson's "Letters to a Young Scientist," Nelson DeMille's "The Quest," Dr. Seuss' "Oh! The Places You'll Go" and "The Cat in the Hat," and "Secrets of Silicon Valley" by Eric Schmidt.
- I also listened to 21 Podcasts, all of them on airplanes (where I also do a lot of my reading). They cover a variety of topics including photography, writing, history, storytelling, and creativity.

So as you can see, I read a lot. I do it because I enjoy it – a lot. Reading transports me, makes me aware of other realities than the one I encounter every day. I've also learned that reading is a powerful competitive weapon. As a general rule I've come to the conclusion that most people don't read, which they need to do to be able to develop the trends and stories for their customer engagements. Their excuse is that they're too busy and can't make the time. And it is an excuse: if you have fifteen minutes for a cup of coffee, you have 15 minutes to read while you're

enjoying it. Let's face it: I read more than most people because I enjoy it and make time for it because it's important to me. As a writer, reading is the most important tool in my toolbox. I also know that new ideas breed empathy and destroy ego, and that new ideas come from reading. So please, folks - READ.

So here's the second point I want to make. Just go out and observe. With no goal in mind other than to learn something new. Take a long walk in your community or hop on a bike - avoid the car, it's too isolating. Make it your mission to find five things you never noticed before and ask, why are they there? What do they do? Why is it that color? How come I've never noticed that before? For example, why are most barns painted red? (I'm not going to tell you - go figure it out). Why are there drab green mailboxes on some street corners that have no door for dropping in a letter? What are they for?

I just finished reading (for the third time, by the way) a wonderful book by John Stilgoe of Harvard University called, *Outside Lies Magic*. It's a book about this very theme and is wonderful - pick up a copy and read it. It's a fantastic source of story material. Here's a quote from the book:

The explorer who slows down or stops for a few moments to look around, to catalog what appears to be absent, becomes the connoisseur of noticing. Most people look around and see things. The explorer looks around and sees the patterns and revelations disclosed by things absent.

For example, think about language, something I do a lot because languages fascinate me. What's the difference between a field and a lot? Stilgoe goes into this in great detail. A field is a large parcel or tract of land that can be subdivided into buildable *lots*. A lot is the smallest piece of land in a community that is actually buildable. In the U.S., lots are typically measured as acres or portions of acres; the rest of the world uses hectares. So what's an acre?

Well, I learned that an acre was originally the area that one man and a team of two oxen could reasonably plow in a single day. The 18th and 19th-century peasants who worked the fields determined what that was based on a handful of factors including the length of the day, their own strength and that of their oxen, and the length of a furrow that could be plowed before they needed to rest. That became known as a furlong. Why? Because a furlong is a *furrow long*. This came to be known as a ground rule. Why? Because it's about the ground.

Here's another interesting set of facts I learned reading Stilgoe's book. Square fields require less fencing than rectangular fields, yet farmers prefer rectangles. A square field 400 feet on a side requires 1,600 feet of fencing, while a rectangular field that is 200 by 800 feet on a side encloses the same amount of land (160,000 square feet) but requires 2,000 feet of fence. Why would a farmer prefer the configuration that adds cost?

The answer is interesting: Because the square field requires more turnarounds with the tractor (or team of oxen) and therefore requires more time and effort. A rectangular field is more efficient, and in a business (farming) where time is money, that's important.

Here's another great fact. Electrical outlets in new houses are always the same distance above the floor. Why? Because that casual yet never-varying distance is the length of the electrician's hammer. Interesting, yes?

Casual measurements like that associated with the electrician's hammer also had an impact on federal law. When Thomas Jefferson was president he wanted all measurements to be based on the decimal system, while John Adams wanted to keep the European metric system. Adams felt that the decimal system favored the wealthy and disadvantaged the poor - like farmers. As long as eggs were sold by the dozen, groups of two, four, six and twelve eggs could be joined together to form a dozen, but if the decimal system was used only groups of two, five and ten could pool resources.

But it goes on. Adams knew that every square mile of land contained 640 acres and that a square mile of land could be apportioned to a single family or divided for four families. It could also be divided among 16 families, with each family getting forty acres, the minimum required for a family to farm and support a mule. Adams also convinced Jefferson that townships should be surveyed in six square-mile surveys containing 36 sections of land, each one 640 acres.

The two founding fathers compromised; Jefferson got his decimal-based currency; Adams got his way with the old "ground rules."

Kind of interesting, eh? And all because I took the time to read a variety of things.

Thanks for reading. Really!