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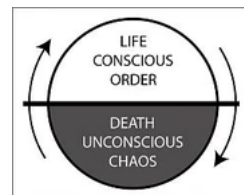
# Story Structure 102: Pure, Boring Theory

This isn't a tutorial. It's just a bunch of theory. The pragmatic or impatient among you can skip this one.

Why this ritual of descent and return? Why does a story have to contain certain elements, in a certain order, before the audience will even recognize it as a story?

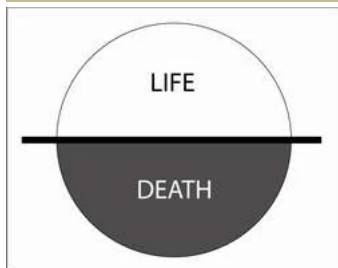
Because our society, each human mind within it and all of life itself has a rhythm, and when you play in that rhythm, it resonates.

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If this is such bullshit, how come I have been able to go 10 episodes with a show called "Laser Fart?"

## THE RHYTHM OF BIOLOGY



The universe around us is dying, moving from a state of high energy to low. On Earth, however, things tend to move in a contrary direction. Eggs turn into chickens. People turn into more people. Flesh heals, stupid becomes smarter, and the planet, once cold and empty, is now so full of life that you can't leave bread on the counter. How has life managed to cheat a dying universe like this?

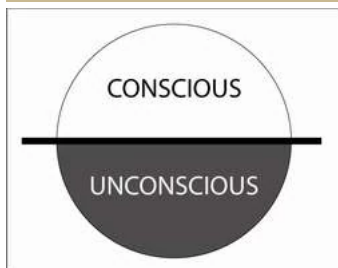
Through death.

This planetwide creature known as "Life on Earth" has been able to grow and thrive through an evolutionary arms race between the various parts of itself. The more advanced parts of life EAT the less advanced parts, thereby becoming more plentiful until a more advanced part consumes it. This causes all life to advance and spread. The ongoing battle between eaters and eaten is responsible for that state-of-the-art biological weapon you call a brain, and it may even lead, one day, to humans flinging themselves like spores, to dead planets and bringing those planets to life.

To you and me, consciously, death may be a bummer, but to Mother Gaia, to life itself, unconsciously, it is absolutely essential- 50% of how shit gets done.

What do I mean by consciously and unconsciously?

## THE RHYTHM OF PSYCHOLOGY



Your mind is a home, with an upstairs and a downstairs.

Upstairs, in your consciousness, things are well-lit and regularly swept. Friends visit. Scrabble is played, hot cocoa is brewing. It is a pleasant, familiar place.

Downstairs, it is older, darker and much, much freakier. We call this basement the unconscious mind.

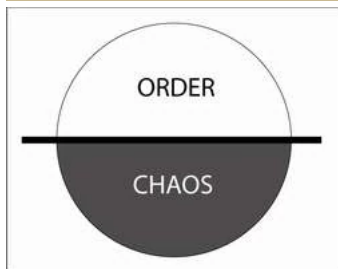
The unconscious is exactly what it sounds like: It's the stuff you don't, won't and/or can't think about. According to Freud, there are dirty pictures of your mother down there. According to Jung, there are pipes, wires, even tunnels down there that connect your home to others. And even though it contains life-sustaining energies (like the fuse box and water heater), it's a primitive, stinky, scary place and it's no wonder that, given the choice, we don't hang out down there.

However, your pleasure, your sanity and even your life depend on occasional round trips. You've got to change the fuses, grab the Christmas ornaments, clean the litter box. To the extent that we keep the basement door sealed, the entire home becomes unstable. The creatures downstairs get louder and the guy upstairs (your ego) tries to cover the noise with neurotic behavior. For some, eventually, the basement door can come right off its hinges and the slimy, primal denizens of the deep can become Scrabble partners. You might call this a nervous breakdown or

psychotic break, it doesn't matter. The point is: Occasional ventures by the ego into the unconscious, through therapy, meditation, confession, sex, violence, or a good story, keep the consciousness in working order.

This is the rhythm of psychology: Conscious-unconscious-conscious-unconscious-etc.

## THE RHYTHM OF SOCIETY



Societies are basically macrocosms (big versions) of people, only instead of "consciousness," a society's upstairs is "order," and its basement is "chaos."

Whereas the health of an individual depends on the ego's regular descent and return to and from the unconscious, a society's longevity depends on actual people journeying into the unknown and returning with ideas.

In their most dramatic, revolutionary form, these people are called heroes, but every day, society is replenished by millions of people diving into darkness and emerging with something new (or forgotten): scientists, painters, teachers, dancers, actors, priests, athletes, architects and most importantly, me, Dan Harmon.

Societies are macrocosms of people in another way: Eventually, they die. There is competition between different societies. The losers are eaten and the winners reproduce.

Like people, societies become neurotic and can eventually break down when they make the mistake of thinking the downstairs shouldn't exist. America is a terrific example of this, as our fear of the unknown continues to create more unknowns and more fear. It's now punishable by bombing to have a problem with America's bombing policy. In a human being, the equivalent would be diagnosable as symptomatic. Our basement is brimming with creepy crawlies, the pressure on the door is building. There has never been a bigger need for heroes and they have never been in such scarcity.

One of two things is going to happen. Someone's going to open that door and go down there, or that door is going fly off its hinges. Either way, social evolution will not be cheated of its rhythm and it's going to get sloppy. We all know it. We all walk around with that instinctive understanding in our unconscious minds.

The rhythm of society: Order-chaos-order-chaos-etc.

## RESONANCE

Now you understand that all life, including the human mind and the communities we create, marches to the same, very specific beat. If your story also marches to this beat- whether your story is the great American novel or a fart joke- it will resonate. It will send your audience's ego on a brief trip to the unconscious and back. Your audience has an instinctive taste for that, and they're going to say "yum."

We'll get back to the nuts and bolts in the next one, elaborating greatly on the circular model and applying it to the 5 minute Channel 101 pilot.

*By Dan Harmon.*

*Next in series:*

[Story Structure 103: Let's Simplify Before Moving On](#)

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