

Finding A Home for Your Story

Summary

Through a fictional account of the discovery of the number Zero, science fiction author and publisher Salik Shah talks about the power of ideas and stories, and how stories that we choose to believe in can ultimately change the world.

Watch: [TED.com](https://www.ted.com/talks/salik_shah_the_discovery_of_zero)

Talk:

Imagine a world without the number zero.

You are a young mathematician, from a small province, who isn't satisfied with the status quo.

You want Math to be easy and accessible to everyone.

To do this, you've developed a new method of solving math equations, which is simple, faster and more elegant.

It involves using a brand new number — the zero.

Once the Royal Academy of Sciences approves your method and accepts your zero, Math won't be so hard, so difficult anymore.

But given your background, the academy is impossible to please.

"Between one and nine," the head of the academy tells you, "we've got all the numbers we need."

“No, Sir,” you plead. “You don’t quite understand. The world needs a symbol for shunya. The world needs zero.”

“No, it doesn’t!” The other members of the academy tell you. “We don’t need you.”

You think they’re testing your resolve. To see if you’d give up.

You have spent countless nights looking at the stars and wondering about their origins.

The universe sprung from nothing — from “shunya” — to something so vast, unknowable, big.

And the number that you’ve come up with — this zero — is the best representation of our obscure point of origin.

You don’t know yet that this null number would one day make complex calculations possible and save countless lives.

You don’t know that it’d help people in the future build human-like robots with artificial intelligence.

For now, you just try to convince the academy that it’s a valid — a proper number.

But they refuse to believe you.

They ridicule and reject you.

So, what do you do?

You leave.

You wander from city to city, trying to find a home for your idea.

It's not easy.

When the going gets tough, when you're cold and starving, you tell yourself: "One day surely the world will recognize my genius. One day, my suffering will surely end."

Sadly, for you, that day never comes.

Some ideas take a long time to find their home.

In the case of zero, it'd take two thousand years.

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Hi, I'm Salik Shah.

I am a science fiction author, publisher — creative entrepreneur.

I use stories like this one to understand our past, explain our present, and imagine our futures.

It's basic human nature to ask — to wonder why the world is what it is.

Why is the world full of suffering?

Why are people not free?

Why can't we just be happy?

If you're like me, you must have thought about these questions at some point in your life, and also come up with plausible answers.

What are these answers?

They are stories. Stories that *you* choose to believe in.

This terrible state of the world we're forced to inherit isn't by default.

It is by our own choice. Our flawed design. Our faulty stories.

Stories that we have been forced to accept as eternal "truth" or "reality".

Stories that justify everything we have failed to fix: from inequality to poverty to the broken healthcare system to hatred and violence, from the suspension of human rights to the end of freedom and democracy.

So, how did we let these faulty, these evil stories win?

How did stories about the good lose their hold, their power over us?

Stories about love, compassion, social harmony and universal kinship.

Stories about science, truth, and justice.

Why did these good stories fail? How did we fail?

Well, the answer is quite simple:

Stories fail when we stop believing in them.

Without belief, stories lose their power.

Societies collapse; nations crumble as we the people surrender our will to the darkest angels of our nature — the monsters within.

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Like most young girls and boys in many parts of the world today, I grew up longing for peace and prosperity during a time of war and conflict.

My first serious attempt at writing a story “Shambhala” deals with this coming-of-age experience.

Even as a young boy, I knew like every child knows the emperor has no clothes, that the world was not a happy place.

And I wanted to fix it.

I invented my own secret alphabet. I dreamt of a united world government.

I obsessed over all sorts of weird things — like getting a cyborg girlfriend. And I wrote “epic” poems and stories about them.

Rejections are part of every writer’s life. And I was no different.

As a young writer, who was just beginning to write in what was essentially a “foreign” language — English —, I couldn’t find a literary journal that would accept or critique my early works.

No surprise there!

Most literary journals and publishers don't even bother to reply to unsolicited submissions.

So, when I started my own literary journal, Mithila Review, six years ago, I made sure that we were open to submissions from around the world.

I made sure that we replied to each and every submission, often with a personal note.

Much like TED, Mithila Review is a truly inclusive and global platform.

We publish the best of science fiction and fantasy from new, emerging and award-winning authors from around the world.

We've won one Rhysling Award for speculative poetry; and (Fingers crossed) we're slowly crawling towards a Hugo win.

Okay, now let's get back to the story of zero for a moment.

Can a story of real or imaginary invention inspire science and creativity?

The short answer is yes.

Science fiction often becomes science fact because it asks what-if questions, and paints all the possible, plausible, probable and preferred futures.

In the form of alternative or future histories, they show us where we went wrong. What is still possible.

From reviving dead cells with electricity as in Mary Shelly's Frankenstein to 3D-printing bionic limbs or artificial organs, from earbuds to tablets, from slinging people to the moon in space cylinders to self-driving cars, science fiction has predicted many of the inventions of the modern world.

All rooted in the human desire to solve a need, fulfill an impulse.

Even as we are building AI and quantum computers with the help of zero and her numerical friends, these complex “thinking” machines don't quite define us.

It's what we humans choose to do with our tools and technologies that ultimately defines humanity.

Speculative fiction is all about making and facing the consequences of our choices.

Human life is unpredictable. Life itself is rare and uncertain in the universe.

The survival of all life forms on Earth depends on us making the right choices.

Our survival depends upon the transfer of knowledge — scientific truths, insights and experiences — from one generation to the next so that we can make data-driven, informed choices.

Where the human DNAs fail, the human language triumphs in storing and transferring such knowledge in the form of stories.

Without these stories of history and science, humanity would be lost.

We can't evolve or flourish as a people.

Once you stop seeing the world through the lens of privilege, gender, race, religion or citizenship, you'll see the world for what it is — a big story.

And once you begin to see the world as a story — a work of fiction, a lie — you will realize that the “ancient” structures of our world are not as permanent or fixed as you once thought.

Truth is anyone can demolish and rebuild the very foundations of our civilization with a new, powerful, and better story.

Ultimately, we are only as good or as bad as the stories we tell about ourselves.

When too many people start believing in a story, accepting it as truth or reality, it has the potential to change the world.

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Time for a disclaimer — a friendly warning:

It's not that easy to change the world. It takes time even for the greatest storyteller.

Chances are, at first your story, idea or invention might get rejected just like zero.

You must learn to be patient.

It can take years, sometimes generations, for some ideas to plant firm roots and blossom in the minds and hearts of the people.

Ideas like the Higgs boson, which took 50 years, 10 billion dollars, and not to mention the collective efforts and discoveries of countless people over many, many generations.

Ideas like the terraforming of Mars into a blue-green planet able to sustain life, a second home for our species, perhaps a thousand years from now.

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In my early 20s, I didn't believe in such long-horizon, blue-sky thinking.

I was young, confused, and hungry for change.

But when change was slow to come, for a while, I stopped believing in the future.

That's why I still remember the story of the Higgs boson.

Stories like the Higgs give us a sense of purpose, and restore our faith in humanity.

The Higgs field was first proposed by scientists in 1964 to explain how elementary particles such as electrons and quarks gain mass.

At the time, scientists didn't have the means to prove the theory.

That's why the discovery of its existence came as a moment of clarity for all of humanity.

Even from a great distance, personally, I could see it was quite a big deal.

A once-in-a lifetime kind of achievement.

Like the electricity. Like the moon landing.

And it definitely marked a turning point for me.

Slowly, I rediscovered my love for science and technology.

Once again I started to believe in the power of ideas, and the promise that future holds.

Soon Mithila Review was born.

And as its founder, I became the board member of Plurality University in France — a global network of artists, utopians and activists who use the power of imagination to enable alternative futures.

I also became an ambassador of the Seasteading Institute to promote the creation of floating cities on the next human frontier — the international waters of our oceans.

In theory, these new floating cities would radically reimagine what we know of architecture, economy, and governance.

In theory, land-based cities would have to embrace change and continuously upgrade in response to the stiff competition from these floating cities.

Just like startups today, cities that fail to serve their communities better will become irrelevant and lose their users—inhabitants—, whether on land or water.

This is science fiction in action.

In one of my short stories screaming to be a novel, *The Architecture of Loss*, I provide a glimpse of what that future would look like.

I propose a new, organic, regenerative, living architecture that co-exists with nature.

Imagine fully autonomous, self-repairing buildings that are living, breathing organisms.

In the same story, I explore terraforming efforts to fight climate change with nano drones, and the inevitable human expansion beyond Earth.

Like in all good stories worth telling, there is one wrinkle in our grand scheme to build a space-faring, galaxy-spanning civilization.

Truth is — as the effects of the climate crisis become worse, we might not even last this century, after all.

We might never become Type II or Type III civilization because of our excessive greed and mindless consumption.

Or perhaps our generation -- your generation -- will save us.

That's a story I choose to believe.

The future of our fragile planet hangs by the breath of your story.

Stories that you choose to believe in.

Remember this:

Your choices can make or break our destiny.

So, before I go — let me ask you:

What's your story?

What do you believe in?

Thank you.