

The Evaluator and the Right-Brain

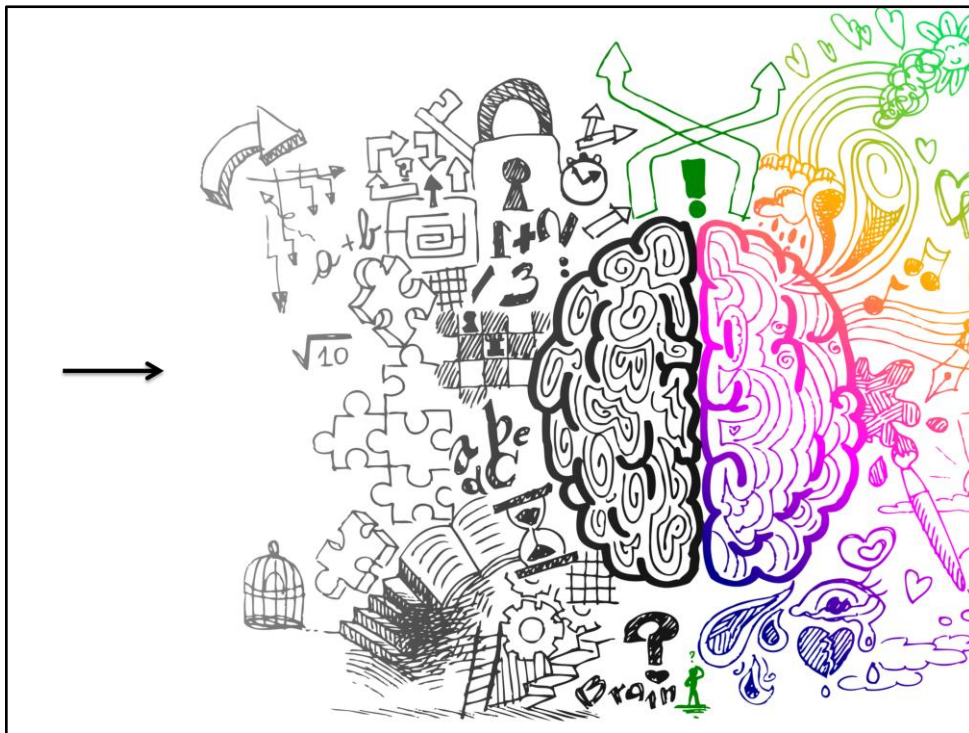


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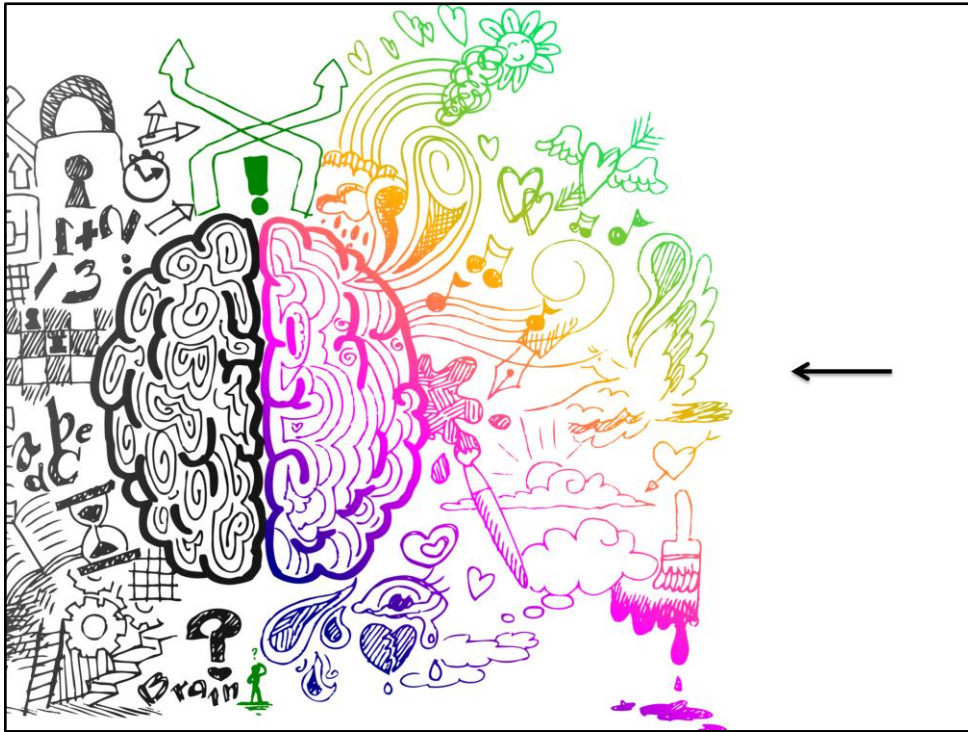
I learned something quite shocking, the world is changing! Ok, we already knew that. But, it turns out, that in order for us to keep up in this changing world, we're going to have to use a body part that most of us aren't that comfortable with, our right-brain.



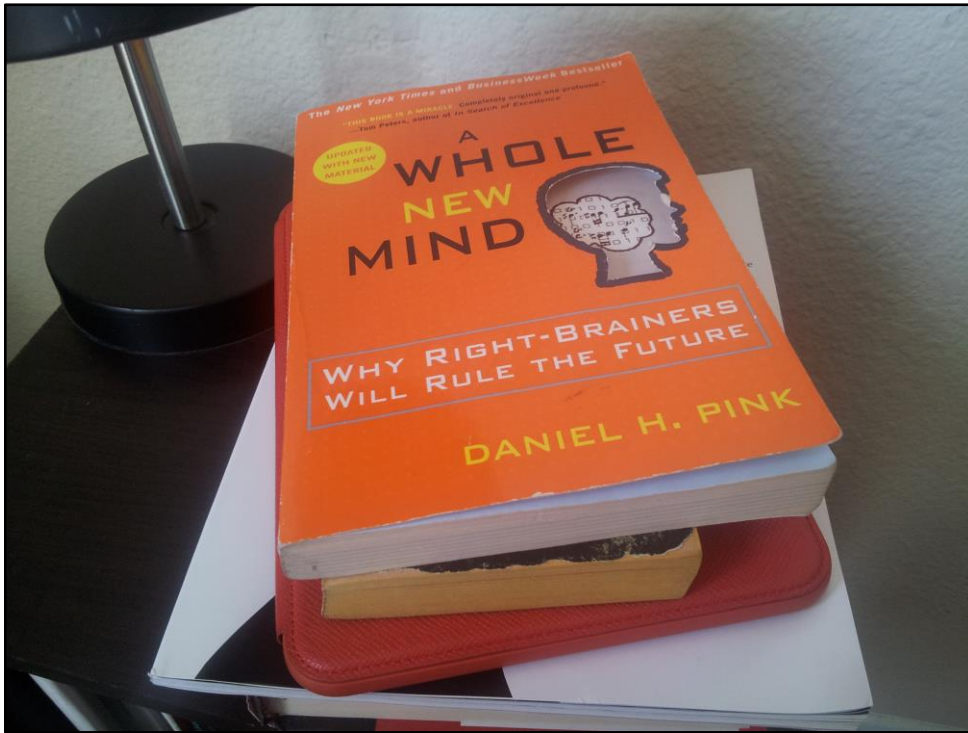
Let's start with this right-brain, left-brain business. There's a distinct division of labor in our brain and each of us has a side of the brain, left or right, that we're a bit more comfortable with, a way of thinking that we're more suited to.



The left side our brain is responsible for analyzing the details, it's logical, linear, computer-like. Folks who excel here tend to become accountants, lawyers, engineers, computer programmers...evaluators.



The right side of our brain is responsible for understanding context, figuring out the big picture. It's creative, empathetic, inventive. People who excel here tend to become inventors, artists, entertainers and counselors.



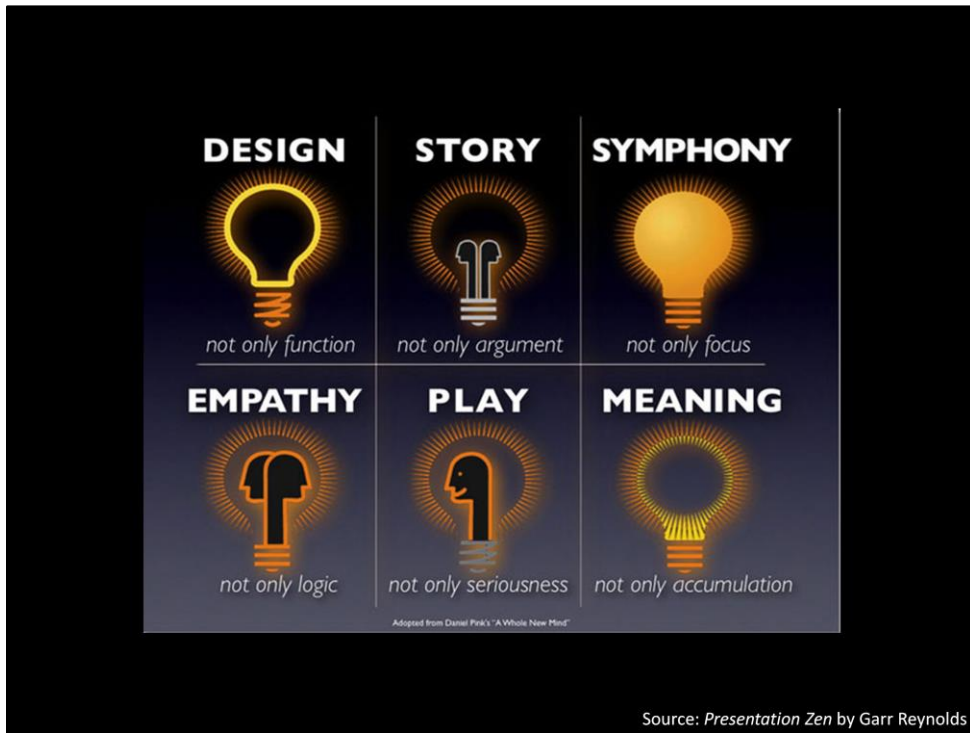
That brings us to this book I read awhile back, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, by Daniel Pink. I'm guessing the pile of books on the nightstand looks a little familiar to my fellow bookworms out there.



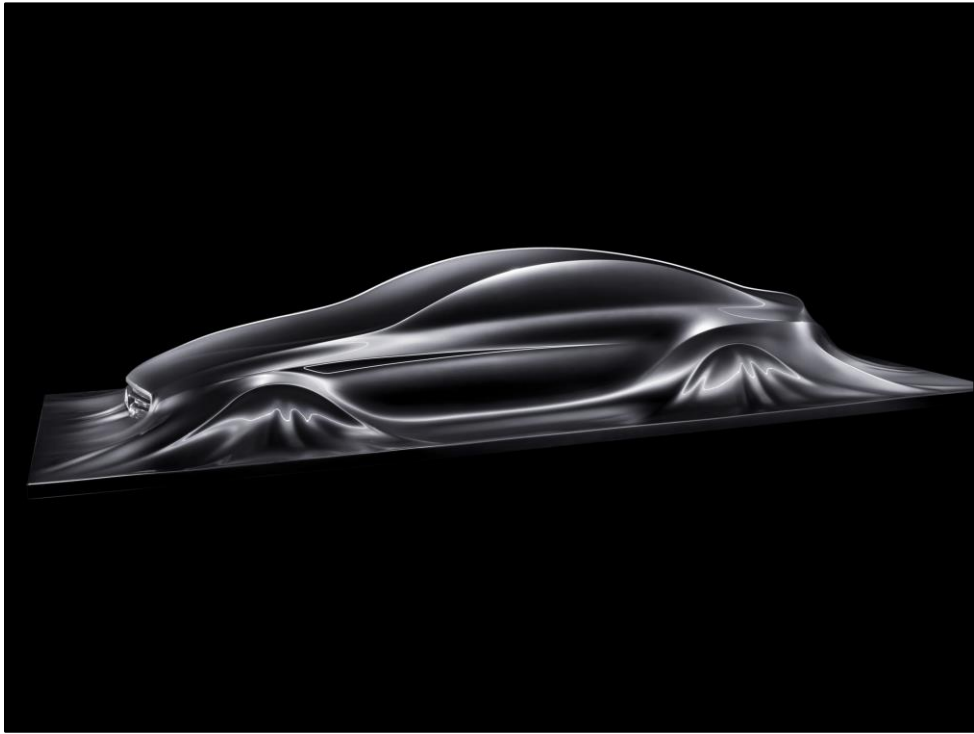
For many decades, left-brain style thinking has dominated along with the knowledge workers who excel at it, i.e. those who can acquire and apply theoretical and analytical knowledge. In this book, Pink argues that that won't be the case much longer.



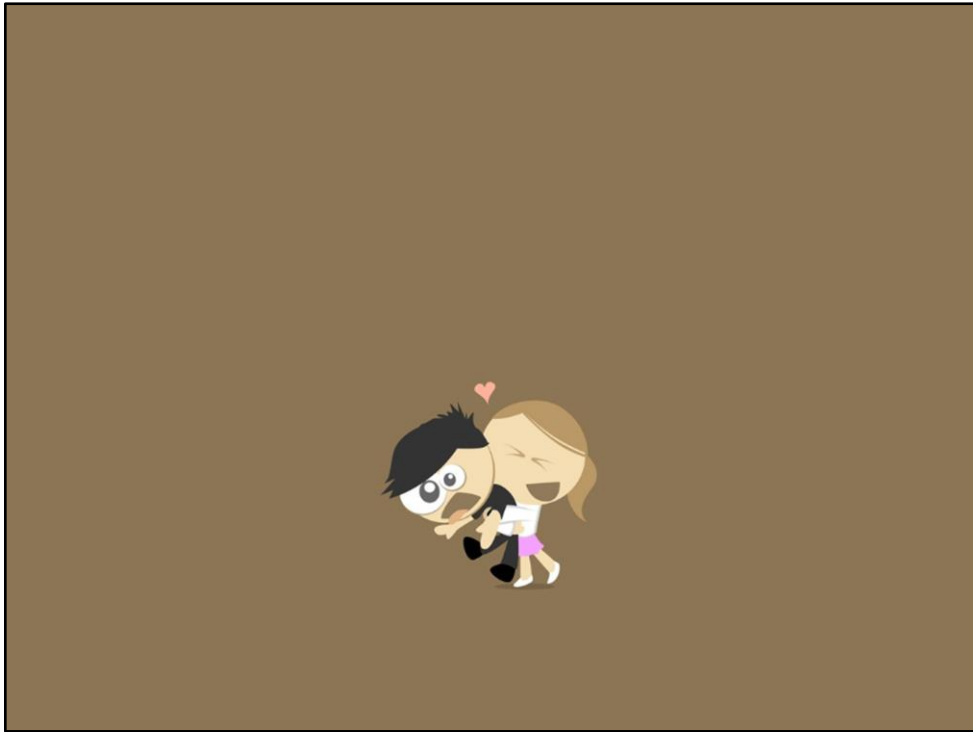
Increasingly, the linear, logical tasks that are the forte of the knowledge worker are being automated and outsourced. Accountants in India are preparing American tax returns and there's a company in Britain that has created software that can write software.



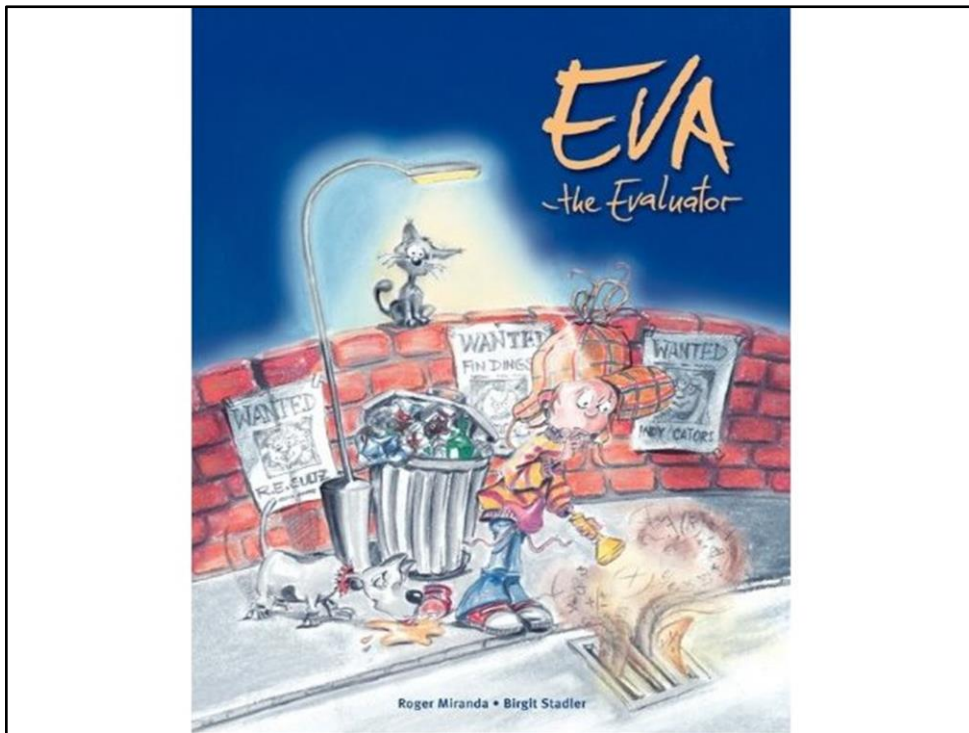
These changes, from a developed world perspective, mean that right-brain aptitudes, skills that aren't easily automated or outsourced, are becoming increasingly important. This includes design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning.



To remain on top, car companies are tapping into these right-brain aptitudes. As one GM executive said, “[We’re in] the art business. Art, entertainment and mobile sculpture, which, coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation.”



Lawyers are facing stiff competition from websites that help consumers create basic legal documents. With their monopoly on this kind of specialized information broken, lawyers are having to, among other things, empathize better.



So what does this mean for evaluators? Over time, it's possible that some of the work we do will be automated, maybe software that walks people through the more routine tasks. Certainly, there are questions being raised about the role of big data.



And, as other professions develop these skills, the people we work with will expect the same from us and we run the risk of becoming outdated. Most importantly, though, these right-brain aptitudes have the potential to make us better evaluators. Let's look at design, for example.



Being more attuned to graphic design principles as we develop reports and presentations can help us engage and enlighten our audience and increase the likelihood that evaluation results will be used. The cool thing is, we've made huge strides here.

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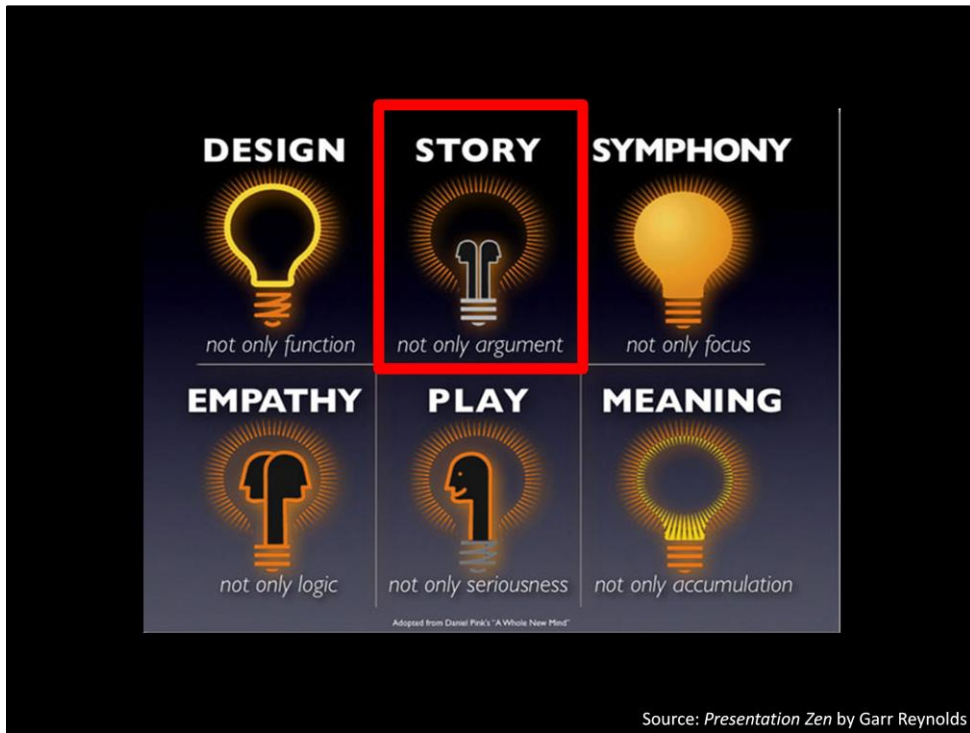
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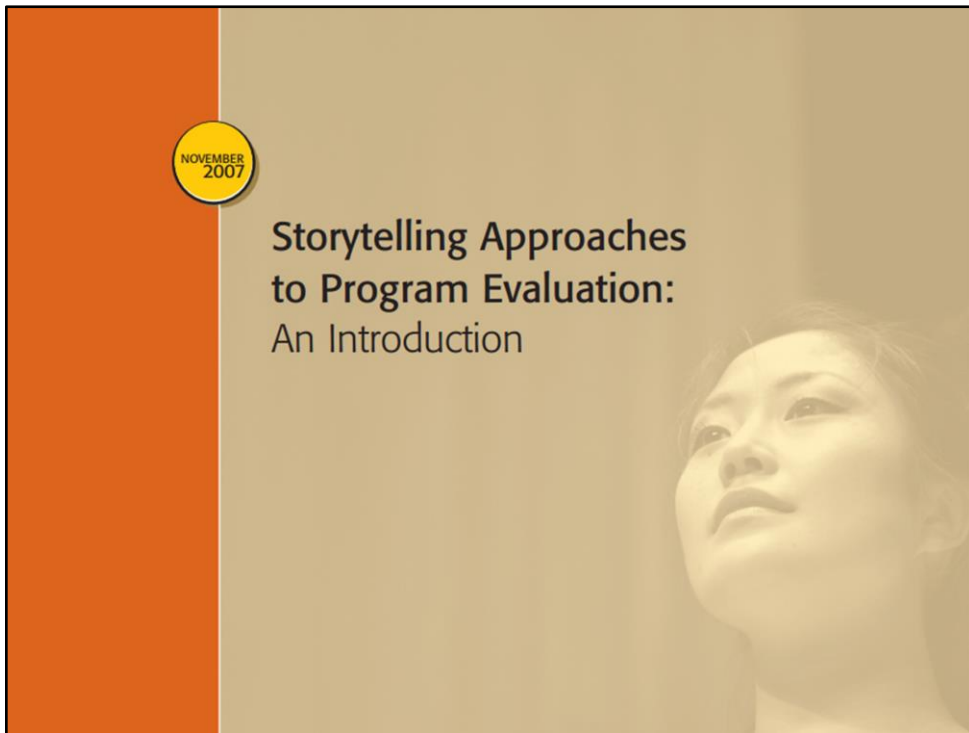
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AEA now has a TIG dedicated to Data Visualization & Reporting. This p2i initiative has made us all take a second look at our slides. And several evaluation bloggers are giving readers concrete steps for improving design.

14



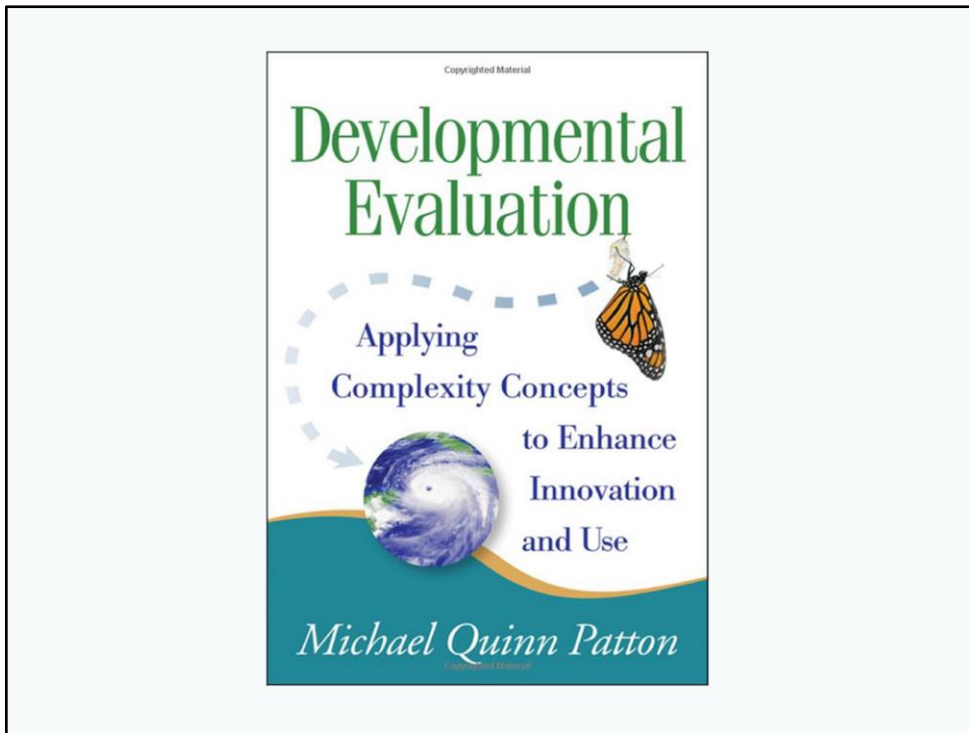
Now, let's look at story. We are all hard wired for this, stories help us organize information, understand past events and plan for the future. In evaluation, they have the potential to be a powerful data collection tool, allowing participants to tell their story in their own way.



There IS work being done here, a handful of organizations are exploring different approaches including the California Endowment which published this guide. It seems to be a bit more on the fringes of the evaluation field though.



And one more, symphony. Part of this aptitude involves crossing boundaries and developing expertise in multiple areas in order to work more effectively. As evaluators, we come up against the boundary between us and program planning, which always raises questions, but...



Efforts to make that boundary more permeable seem to be gaining momentum and could strengthen our work. Developmental evaluation, for example, which puts the evaluator on the program planning team, is on the rise and helping us tackle evaluation in complex environments.



Where do we go from here? I think we have a lot to discuss, as a field. How might this negatively affect our work? Which aptitudes should we develop? What other benefits might we see? How do learn, test, and move forward? Lastly, if you're thinking, like I did: Oh crap! I'm so not good at this stuff.



Don't worry, you can do it, these abilities are part of human nature, they just need to be whipped back into shape. As Pink writes, "Back on the savannah, our cave-person ancestors weren't taking SATs or plugging numbers into spreadsheets. But they were telling stories, demonstrating empathy, and designing innovations."

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