USING STORY AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL DEVICE

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Introduction

Several years ago when my family moved, leaving behind an unsold house 2000 miles away from our new home, we became friends with the realtor who agreed to handle the sale in our absence. As a gift on closing, she sent us the scant 96-page book, *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and Your Life* (Johnson & Blanchard, 1998). For her, the book had been a help during a time of professional change. In passing on the book, she hoped the message would ease our transition into a new phase of life.

Despite a love/hate relationship with the public, this little parabolic story featuring mice in a maze has been distributed in more major corporations and educational institutions than any book of its size in a decade. A similar, but true-life parable, *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* (Lundin, Paul, & Christensen, 2001) has also broken records in both book sales and training revenues based on the profound but simple concepts presented through the representation of the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle. What is it about these books that have grabbed the attention of the masses, and how can such a little tool make such a big difference in so many corporations and personal lives?

Part of the phenomena represented by these two books, according to industrial psychologist Andrew DuBrin is that they represent values that people (and corporations) want to possess (Walker, 2002). Both these stories are value laden. But far more important seems to be the fact that these little stories are easily passed, both through word of mouth and through passing on the books themselves, as our realtor demonstrated. In that sense, these stories function in much the same way as stories have throughout human history—as tools to pass important messages into new realms.

The Power of Stories

Stories have been told to pass on history, religion, normative practice within cultures, and to impart worldview. Stories have also been told to teach and to entertain. The best stories merge the two purposes seamlessly so that they become part of the cognitive background against which further thinking and decision-making occurs. But what makes story any more effective than the simple passing of information through bulleted lists?

To better understand the role story plays in the process of change, it is necessary to understand story through the eyes of cognitive science, psychodynamic theory, and social context. We live in the context of a narrative, influenced by both our personal stories and the meta-narratives that permeate our culture. We are "wired" for stories, both through our early experiences of being read and talked to, and by the nature of our brain function. Story engages emotion, releasing chemicals that are a powerful tool for retention. When we connect to a story, we do not engage vicariously in a situation. We engage directly and have a biologically grounded response to the story. Story engages imagination about what could be, and therefore inspires hope. Story opens up the door to alternative paths of action, overcoming "mental blocks." Shared stories become shared experience in groups, providing a common language and imagery for communication. Thus story is a powerful social medium as well as a powerful personal medium in which to develop the realm of possibility and entertain ideas that open the door to change. Story must be examined in the light of both its internal and external power.

Ted Hughes, a children's poet and novelist says that stories are "little factories of understanding continually providing new implications and revelations of meaning" (Hambleton, 2001). If that is true of stories as individual entities, how much more so for story as an art form and change agent! By understanding how story impacts human behavior, we begin to understand more about the intricacies of our nature that we so take for granted, and how this simple tool both binds us to the past and moves us toward the future.

Story and Knowing

From a cognitive standpoint, stories rely on analogy and metaphor as powerful connective devices. Both metaphor and analogy serve as tools for cognitive organization, helping individuals to understand a new thought in terms of something known and better understood. Analogy fosters a one-to-one correspondence across different parts of the comparison (Gentner, 1998). Once someone has "mapped" an analogous situation through a story, he or she may well be able to map to a third analogous situation in his or her own life, and adapt those representations in a way that facilitates change. One study discovered that the rate of transfer to life experience was significantly increased when case studies were presented during training for the purpose of discovering analogous conditions between the cases rather than merely for the purpose of case analysis (Thompson, Gentner, & Loewenstein, 2000).When an analogy includes emotional transfer as well as cognitive transfer, such as those that include an element of humor, they become an even stronger force for change (Thagard & Shelley, 2003).

Taking hold of a metaphorical comparison facilitates a holistic understanding, a "knowing" that transcends linear logic (Royce & Powell, 1983) and defies the kind of mapping described above. Lyddon, Clay and Sparks (2001) found that metaphor as a device in counseling may help clients in establishing precursors of change including relationship building, accessing and symbolizing emotion, uncovering and challenging tacit assumptions, reducing resistance, and introducing new frames of reference.

Metaphor contributes to social understanding in organizations as well as to individual knowing (Hart, 2003). If an organization changes the metaphor with which it identifies, it changes the identity itself. Metaphor has also been shown to be a good tool for individuals to reflect on change within an organization (Perry & Cooper, 2001), particularly as participants tell their own metaphorical stories to explain their experience with change. This allows participants to provide a context from which to make sense of their worlds, bring about a richer understanding, and identify those things that have not yet been named.

Teaching through story, whether through the use of analogy and metaphor or other literary devices provides a sense not only of connection but also of structure in that stories contain a beginning (background information), a middle (a conflict), and an end (a resolution) (Egan, 2003). As a retention tool that facilitates recall and opens space for processing and reprocessing, the structure is invaluable. This structural element of story that embraces conflict rather than excluding it makes story available to transfer to real life experience, because real life is full of conflict. In fact, it is the sense of conflict in a situation that leads to the perception of a need for change. Logic is a linear process which breaks down when conflict occurs, and goes in search of redefinition. Story persists in circular fashion, searching for its ending. It is resistant to any form of reductionism.

Stephen Denning, author of *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Denning, 2000) and former executive of the World Bank insists that storytelling doesn't replace analytical thinking, but instead augments it by opening up an imaginative element. Denning suggests that stories can serve at least seven purposes in facilitating change within organizations: igniting transformational action, growing

community, sharing knowledge, transmitting values, defining identity, transforming a narrative dynamic, and pointing the way toward the future. According to Denning, stories should be differently structured to accomplish each purpose.

The didactic stories Denning proposes, for use within an organizational framework, have much in common with ancient rabbinic stories, such as those told to and by Jesus. These stories sought to teach truth not in the sense of objective, scientific reality, but rather as rhetoric that portrayed eternal truth in a meaningful context (Rubenstein, 1999). Rabbis designed stories for their own didactic purposes, and portrayed individuals who discover that the true nature of things is often different from how things appear to be. It was not necessary for the characters or figures to act consistently in each story. It was more important that the character act as required by the purpose of the didactic.

Mills, Crowley, and Ryan (2001), elaborating on the work of Milton Erickson proposed a use of metaphoric story that bridges the didactic and the therapeutic. Through applying a carefully crafted and personalized story in the context of a therapeutic setting, they have documented change in individuals who manifest habits that extend from enuresis and thumb-sucking in children to relational crises in adults.

In contrast to this highly personalized form of storytelling, bibliotherapy utilizes carefully selected printed literature to help people in crisis identify parallels to problems and needs they are experiencing, and to try out different solutions in a less threatening environment than "real life." Some research indicates that individuals who engage in bibliotherapy as a means of change may not benefit unless they engage in some form of de-briefing, while others may make changes without ever consciously identifying the role of the story (Silverberg, 2003).

There are some very practical reasons for telling stories including their memorable quality, their link to a different way of knowing, and their ability to evoke a connection to deeper meaning. These include the fact that audiences are inclined to listen more attentively to stories than to data, however effectively presented. Stories also allow people to engage in discovery learning by linking the text with their own experiences. Stories create bonds of identification with both the characters and storytellers (Silverman, 2003), and thus establish an emotionally safe and supportive space for change.

Catherine Wallace asserts that the very nature of stories is that, visibly or invisibly, something always happens. Stories are always about movement, growth, or change. "In short, stories change the world. The world changes in all these ways because your story encourages me to act or to feel in certain ways be immersing me—just for a while—in a created world in which the power and the importance and the meaning of virtue are much clearer than they ever can be in 'real life.'" (Wallace, 1999)

Storytelling

Good stories fit snugly, but are never restrictive. They always allow us to explore the unknown in safety, and to ponder possibilities. They allow us try out the steps of change in a risk-free environment. They allow us to assume the roles of hero and victim without loss of face. Perhaps this is why animal stories have a universal appeal. The animal identification can be snug without restricting in the same way a human character can if he or she bears too close a resemblance to the listener, which might restrict and thus invite resistance.

It seems to matter little whether the stories we connect with are true experiences of the storyteller, or imaginative flights of fancy, so long as they engage the emotions as well as the intellect. Some early researchers postulated that the impact of stories is that they engage the right hemisphere of the brain. Brain scans now tells us that profound truths are not experienced by a hemisphere, but that they engage both hemispheres and connect to the amygdala, where they are given a "supercharge" through emotional impact. In fact, the more personal experience a story evokes in a listener—the more neural pathways that are connected—the more likely that story will be retained long enough to be reflected upon, and thus the greater the chance of pervasive change.

Story has been demonstrated to be an effective device for change in both individuals and organizations. Stories don't have a right or wrong way of occurring, although they may portray issues of right or wrong. There is always something unknown and open to interpretation in a story, even when it is your story being told. We organize our interpretation of our selves and our life experiences through story. It is between the acts of organizing and interpreting that there is room for change, for incorporation of new ways of looking at things and for new potential outcomes. Stories are always being revised and added to, whether the stories are personal or corporate. Storytelling is, by nature, a collaborative act because the elements of telling and interpreting are constantly dancing. The teller can never escape the interpretation given by the listener, and the listener is forever changed by the interaction with the teller. How much change occurs may depend on both the skill of the teller and the depth to which the listener submerges in the story.

The success of both the books and the related seminars in the case of *Who Moved My Cheese* and *Fish* may be explained by the fact that bibliotherapy is more effective for some people when accompanied by an analytical or application component. These stories have perhaps worked so well as change agents because they invoked both values and imagery that equally challenge and fit within the meta-narratives of Western society. They've been easily discussed in a wide audience, further augmented by smart marketing. They are easily summarized, but are open enough to invite personal participation in the multiplicity of potential outcomes of the story.

However, it is also clear from the psychological literature (Mills et al., 2001) that story sometimes bypasses analysis and simply results in a paradigm shift or behavioral changes that are relatively immune to the need for verbalization.

The understanding of the cognitive processes engaged in the interpretation of story is a nice bridge from the modernist obsession with science and the postmodern obsession with the concept of relativity. Where story has been in a state of mild disgrace as a valid tool for change in the modern age, in the postmodern era story promises to reemerge as the giant change agent it has always been. However, storytelling is no longer in the hands of a single communicator. Storytelling is emerging from a team model in movies, dance, music, and theatre. No longer dependent on only the expressions and tones of a single voice, story charges at its listeners with a powerful array of technological tools that threaten to overwhelm the imaginative force of the listeners' own interpretive voices. Only by appreciating the power of story will the listener use the story reflectively, as a good friend

that invites interaction and extension rather than as an impersonal and somewhat obnoxious acquaintance that demands uninterrupted attention. Only by appreciating the power of story will the storyteller leave unselfish space for the imaginative engagement of the listener, and allow the listener to use heart and soul as well as senses to hear and understand the story.

Conclusion

Story used interactively is a powerful tool for change in both individuals and communities. Story gains our attention, focuses our understanding, exercises our imaginations, and invites a response. Perhaps those are some of the myriad reasons that Jesus, the great life-changer, used stories to convey to us the changes that would be necessary if we are to live the Kingdom of God.

There are cognitive, social, and psychodynamic bases for the effectiveness of story as a change agent, and there are cognitive, social, and psychodynamic outcomes that are capacitated as story is utilized. The effective storyteller will craft stories that are cognitively, socially, and psychologically sensitive. The storyteller must never forget, however, that storytelling is first an art form, and second, a relational experience. Whether the teller's goal is didactic, therapeutic, or relationally oriented, the teller will remember that the listener holds the keys to the story's effectiveness, and that change will happen as the listener engages with the story, perhaps long after the teller is gone and forgotten.

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