


# The Art and Science of Story or “Are you sitting uncomfortably?” Part 2: The Weft and the Warp of Purposeful Story

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
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# The Art and Science of Story or “Are you sitting uncomfortably?”

## Part 2: The Weft and the Warp of Purposeful Story

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*In this second article, Dave Snowden positions Story against other approaches to story telling in organisations and identifies the different forms of purposeful story that can be constructed using anecdotal material, archetypes and values extracted from an organisation. The various uses of these stories and ethical principles involved in the use of story technique are described conclude the article.*

“Nasrudin was carrying home some liver which he had just bought. In the other hand he had a recipe for liver pie which a friend had given him. Suddenly a buzzard swooped down and carried off the liver. ‘You fool!’ shouted Nasrudin, ‘the meat is all very well – but I still have the recipe!’”

Idries Shah *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*

Part I of this two-part article outlined a series of methods by which we could create an anecdotal base. By using techniques drawn from anthropology and a variety of physical and virtual story circles we collect a set of anecdotes that, if we have avoided undue influence, will reflect the real thinking, culture and know-how and know-why of that community. Aside from its use in the construction of Story, this anecdotal base can also be used as source material for a knowledge asset map of the organisation (Snowden 2000a). We have also identified a series of techniques that allow us to identify key elements of those anecdotes using a variety of deconstruction schema, and we have also gained huge value by extracting from those anecdotes both archetypal characters and organising principles. Arrayed before us, to pursue the metaphor of the title; is a wonderful collection of many coloured threads that we can use to weave into a tapestry of purposeful Story.

At its most basic we have two options, we can take an individual anecdote and enhance it so that it becomes a Story, or we can create a new fictional or factional Story taking elements from the various anecdotes that we have collected. In order to do this we have to determine the **purpose** that Story is intended to serve, the **form** it should assume and the manner of its **representation**. All three of these decisions are obviously intertwined, although purpose is paramount. It is also critical to identify if any shift is required in the organising principles or the archetypes. Even if no change is required, there may still be a desire to emphasis a particular archetype or re-enforce an organising principle.

### **Story Purpose: Organising Principles and Archetypes**

Here we see some of the real power of Story in its ability to shift cultures. We also see one of the self limited aspects of Story, in that an attempt to move an archetype too far from its current position, or to attempt to radical a change in the organising principles will not gain traction within in the community; it creates an anti-story as defined in Part I. This cynical reaction to an unbelievable story is more dangerous than if the story had not been constructed in the first place. Shifts are best achieved in a series of gradual movements with a paranoid attention to the threat of anti-story and close monitoring once used. To some extend this can be anticipated by the inclusion of virus elements (described later) in the story against foreseeable anti-story, but the danger is ever

present. A catastrophic shift is possible and sometimes necessary, although not easy and the results are unpredictable, requiring highly skilled facilitation; this paper will focus on gradual improvements. It should also be remembered that organising principles tend to be expressed in the form of rules, values or beliefs. The form taken is itself revealing of the organisations' culture. There is no hard and fast rule about which are easier to change, it depends very much on the context and the story form or forms in use.

The importance of gradual change should now be clear, but an example may help, let us take one of the organising principles outlined in Part I: "making a decision is the starting point of a new discussion". The gut reaction is to create a story about making decisions and sticking to them. However this message is too far away from reality and breaks the strongly consensual culture of the organisation; such a story would result in many anti-stories of decisions made without sufficient consultation resulting in some form of disaster. In practice there might be an unconscious 'white blood cell' reaction to ensure that there were some disasters, or to recall previous mistakes. If on the other hand we create stories to indicate the legitimate boundaries of consensus approach, and validate a new rule, for example *a decision that needs immediate action to avoid competitive threat cannot be unmade until we have at least tried it*; this legitimises behaviour that would otherwise generate anti story, but starts a process of switching the culture. A little change is normally the most one wants as cultural change interventions can go wrong very quickly, and a closely monitored and incremental approach is more manageable, unless the conditions for catastrophic intervention are fulfilled.

Failure to understand and extract the organising principles is one of the reasons for failure in many attempts at anecdote enhancement. Often these take dominant myths and attempt to deride undesirable behaviour or build up and endorse individual examples of maverick behaviour. They are driven by goals set for their engagement by their sponsor and without the raw material of anecdote deconstruction together with the archetype and organising principles are effectively attempting a green field intervention without any arguments to present to the contrary.

Understanding the current context in a recognisable form is key. The extraction of archetypes and organising principles in a collaborative process has the following effect:

1. it reduces the impact and influence of the facilitator or consultant and a dependency on their interpretation of the context;
2. purpose is achieved by the decision to reinforce or change an archetype of organising principle and can thus be expressed in concrete terms understandable to a broad population;
3. the effect of a story intervention can be measured by repeating the anecdotal capture and extraction process
4. the archetypes and organising principles reduce the likelihood of different understandings and interpretations of what has been found and what is to be achieved, while allowing a necessary level of ambiguity.

If we know and have a common understanding of where we are, it is much easier to start a journey of change. That is not the same thing as setting a goal. Goal based interventions are rarely successful where there is a high cultural content as it is not possible to handle a reductionist approach to the isolation and association of cause and effect. We can influence and attempt to change; we can commence our journey with a clear purpose, but we may have to adapt as we progress.

## **Contrasting Approaches to the use of Story**

A survey of current literature and practice identifies four other approaches to the use of stories within an organisational context. Although all three are useful, some are more complete and purposeful than others. The three are:

1. The use of stories as a research tool received increasing prominence with the growth of post modernism and its emphasis on the authenticity of narrative. There are several examples of capturing and interpreting such anecdotal material in a broad range of material. Most recently Gabriel's recent book (2000) provides a useful reference base to literature in this area and a phrase from his introduction summarises this approach; "stories open valuable windows into the emotional, political, and symbolic lives of organisations, offering researchers a powerful instrument for carrying out research. By collecting stories in different organisations, by listening and comparing different accounts, by investigating how narratives are constructed around specific events, by examining which events in an organisations history generate stories and which ones fail to do so, we gain access to deeper organisational realities, closely linked to their members experiences." There is however still a dependency on the researcher to provide the analysis as 'expert' and there is no attempt to use the material to construct stories in a dynamic discovery process. Most research in this area is reductionist in nature trying to identify and isolate 'facts' which are capable of rational analysis.
2. A second group create or reflect on actual stories from their companies and enhance or expand these to make a point. Denning's book *The Springboard* (2000) is a lyrically told story which weaves together several actual stories from the World Bank. Another example is 3M (Brown and Bromiley 1998.) This can be very effective. Told by a gifted storyteller who resists the temptation to embellish the story, or miss inconvenient elements – and few resist this temptation – it can work. The dangers are where people do to seek out the real 'facts' or belief that the context from which the story is drawn is not repeatable: 'that would never be allowed if I did it' is a not infrequent anti-story response only marginally better than 'If you believe that you'll believe anything'. There is then the danger that the story is too close to the day-to-day experiences and reality of its audience. It fails to take them outside of themselves in order to gain new perspective, but instead re-enforces existing prejudice and cognitive filtering. Critically this approach precludes fiction. There is also a tendency, reinforced by techniques such as appreciate enquiry to only look for positive stories. While this may be valid in individual counselling it is not in the context of organisational story telling where the most powerful and useful stories are often negative (Snowden 2000).
3. A third group freely embraces fiction; seeing stories as seen a means of conveying meaning, stimulating a response and enhancing understanding of complex issues. A good example of this is can be found in a recent monograph from The Spark Team (2000) in which a fully developed 'Treasure Map Fable' is provided with annotation with the intent to "develop a common understanding through the exploration of the ambiguity – whilst accepting that it will always be there." The fictional format allows indirect tackling of issues using a similar approach to that of the Longitude metaphor in Part I. There are however dangers in this approach. Firstly the facilitator, analyst or storyteller has a major impact on the project in terms of content rather than process, and this can be dangerous and potentially manipulative. In addition the issue of resonance is more haphazard than basing the stories on anecdotal fragments as is advocated for Story. Finally more cynical audiences may see the approach, as trendy or at worst propaganda dressed up in childish format, and may loose impact as a result. The Spark example does not fall into this danger, but gifted individuals with many years of experience constructed it. For Story to be a pervasive approach we need more scalability. As stated in the title, Story is a Science and an Art, Science is necessary for scalability, Art for impact; it's a question of balance.
4. The final group is interested in story *per se*; it includes folklorists, professional storytellers, ethno-cultural specialists and others. This includes many specialists involved in the film industry, journalism and creative writing. Valuable resources include McKee's inspirational book "Story" which is a tool kit for the budding and

experienced scriptwriter; Campbell's seminal work on Heroes and, from the perspective of a journalist Kransdorff's "Corporate Amnesia". There are many story groups and festivals around the world, which display traditional forms of story, often in a modern context. This group provides a hugely valuable resource base of skills and some also work in and with organisations. There is a purist wing however, who feel that some of the work in organisational story telling involves a loss of purity, and to be honest they are probably right. The purpose of organisational storytelling is not to tell a good story, but to achieve a defined purpose: the two are compatible but not always contiguous.

Whereas elements of all the above four are encompassed by Story, Story is distinguished by its anecdotal collection methods which reduce the impact of the researcher; the use of anecdotal material for stories; the identification of archetypes and organising principles expressed in those anecdotes; the deliberate attempt to change or reinforce the culture as represented by those archetypes and organising principles; and the emphasis on construction of the story in a collaborative context (see later).

The most fundamental issue is not be seduced by a good story, but to establish a purpose and use story as a tool not as an end in itself. Working with actors in story construction, one has to constantly pull them back from creating an entertainment at the expense of purpose. As people get into organisational storytelling its very power and novelty can lead to seduction, and all the consequent blindness that follows.

## **Story Forms**

Different Story Forms have different purposes. Four are isolated here, but this is not a hard and fast list, neither are the categories mutually exclusive, a virus may be created using a fable, and fable or myth format may be used in an archetypal story system. Fable is described in some detail with an example as it is the most controllable form of story. There is one qualification to the list that follows; for many people working in story, myth and fable have precise meanings. Their use here could as easily be replaced with some neutral term such as 'short form'. It is not the author's intention to get into a debate on the language, which can easily be changed, the content on the other hand is a different matter.

## **Myth**

Myths build up in all organisations, but they all need a sparking point or focus: the Myth Subject. They may relate to a visionary founder: Thomas J Watson Jnr. stories still abound in IBM many years after his passing. They may dangerously grow about a company's competitive position or its abilities. Myths are simple stories that spread easily and have different decay rates. A strong Myth Subject can mean that the decay rate is very slow; this can be seen in organisations with a long history and cohesive culture, reinforced and renewed by the myth form stories that are constantly told and re-told. Myths can also decay very quickly and become anti-stories, particularly in cases of perceived hypocrisy: the leader who calls for self sacrifice but travels first class for example.

It is possible to create myths. In one example a myth created around a mixture of real and imagined incidents was told around a water cooler at head office on a Wednesday lunch time and had been retold in eight hundred stories nation wide by close of business on Friday; furthermore over the next few weeks it gave rise to other myth form stories in which individuals modified their own experiences to validate or provide further examples of the behaviour the myth had been intended to create. However this is a dangerous use of story that can misfire and is probably unethical: confession time here with the benefit of hindsight, although it worked in a research context it is not advisable.

Myths are one of the best indicators of culture within an organisation. They spontaneously occur, but they can legitimately be sparked. A senior executive making a speech can introduce the Myth Subject or web cast, constructed using story techniques

and designed to stimulate myths. As effective is a well-reported action – turning up unannounced to help out in some mundane task, unblocking bureaucracy can create a hero figure and associated myths. Many CEO's do this instinctively and appear to be able to achieve the impossible; they are "the new alchemists" (Handy 1999).

However one cannot always rely on visionary people. Construction of Myth Subjects and coaching of executives in their use can be done without too great a difficulty. Such work needs to be linked with a continuous anecdotal capture process as this allows the measurement of the speed with which myths occur as a result of their stimulation with the Myth Subject and the form of their mutation over what timescale. This provides a highly valuable measurement system that permits fast response if the mutation is degenerating to anti-story. The faster the response the less entrenched the myth becomes.

Understanding the long-standing myths of an organisation is important. Such myths can be captured and re-told in induction training to give one simple example. Normally a new recruit will take weeks, if not months to pick up on the myths that maketh the organisation and which are never the same as the script that is provided in induction training. On a negative front myths provide one of the strongest indicators of where an organisation by be suffering from the tunnel vision illustrated by the metaphor of Longitude in Part I. Self awareness of the nature of myth in an organisation is the first step to creating a more responsive and adaptable culture.

A specialised form is the urban myth. These spontaneously generate with no factual basis within all societies. They generally have a purpose. The common urban myth of the householder who put a pet animal in a microwave to dry it, had little origin in fact but self generated very quickly after microwaves came on the market. Effectively the urban myth generates around an amusing, in the sense of black humour, example of what might happen, which serves as a warning to the community. In some cases urban myths are examples given of bad or good practice that communities like so much, that they become real on re-telling as each member of the community adds more and more personalisation to the story.

## **Fable**

Fables are distinguished from myth by their means of propagation, their length and the formality of their message. A fable is structured so as to be told by a storyteller in such a manner, and with sufficient complexity that the audience is unable to repeat the story, but remembers the message. It is important here to distinguish between *complex* and *complicated*. A jumbo jet is complicated, it takes a high level of expertise to deconstruct it into its component parts and only an elite can ever understand the whole, which is also the sum of its parts. In contrast a mayonnaise is complex (Cilliers 1998), it can be appreciated without a detailed understanding of its components, it is never the aggregate of its components; there is a significant difference between a chef and a cook, and indeed between chefs. So it is with a good fable; a complex interweaving of anecdotal material in which the audience awaits each new peak in anticipation of a satisfactory and often surprising ending with two messages:

1. The formal moral or lesson that should end each fable and which is expected by the audience, it will often be common sense, it may take the form of a memorable saying, a quotable quote or an extended lecture; but it is a moral.
2. The more powerful message lies in the sub-text of the story, the hidden messages contained in the way that behaviour is described, the actions of a character and their association with good or evil. A powerful storyteller naturally uses the sub-text to convey his or her real meaning, and because it is indirect it is absorbed and internalised more naturally.

There is no firm or definitive structure for a fable, but the following is a good example, using the water engineers' story, a fable constructed from the author's own experience

of this type of work. The story is outlined in the first column in a much-abbreviated form with commentary in the second; in its normal mode it takes ten to fifteen minutes to tell properly – a file containing a video of this can be obtained from the author. The formal message is about the need for a social context for knowledge exchange and recognition of its voluntary nature. The sub-text is an all out attack on the wrong sort of over mechanical consultancy, which, by implication, is not practiced by the storyteller.

I work in companies as an anthropologist – stacking shelves, sweeping metal scarf off the floor	Establish unique experience of story teller - create relationship with audience
One example of this is a group of water engineers who had suffered a plague of consultants, they were hostile	Start the story and set up the sub-text
I asked them to just let me work with them for a week, I didn't mind the dirty jobs <<PAUSE>> never ask a water engineer to give you the dirty jobs, you end up, up to your neck in s***	Humour, re-empathise difference in consultancy approach to reinforce sub-text. Self deprecation to gain audience sympathy
I came to appreciate that these guys have a really difficult job	Transition, signify by shift in body position and voice tone
Firstly its hard physical labour – you try to dig a hole in a road in England in January in the middle of a mains burst, you can hardly feel your fingers for the cold	First beat of a law of “ascending threes” – we are trained in childhood to recognise three tasks, three prizes etc.
Secondly it requires a high degree of customer relationship management skill – if you have raw sewerage being pumped into your kitchen sink you kinda of like loose you capacity to have a rational dialogue with a representative of the water company	Second beat of a law of “ascending three” – use of humour and empathy, more extreme than the first – the audience now knows that there is a third and it will be even better. Deliberate use of colloquial language.
Thirdly, it needs a high degree of spatial intelligence – storyteller, elaborates a sub-story of arriving at a house to find a man in his bath naked his bath surrounded by fresh water shrimps as a result of another engineer turning the wrong valve on the wrong aquifer system many miles away..	Third beat – and the best. Audience now totally swept into the rhythm of the story and prepared for the messages, ready for the transition into the messages via an inciting incident.
It took a few days of hell before they realised that I really meant it, and then they started to trust me. I knew this was the case when they sent me to the depot to collect a ‘stand alone’ <<PAUSE>> and after I had stood alone for half an hour .....	Clear inciting incident, allows transition to next act, demonstrates that trust was real and reminds audience of similar experiences in their own histories  Use pauses – if the audience gets the “stand alone” reference don't explain it, otherwise do.
Then I started to find things out	Transition point, change of tone and stance
First, did you know they still use dowsing	Another law of successive threes,

<p>rods? Storyteller explains dowsing rods and contrasts with 'rational approaches with electronic thumpers and echo sounders <i>But that's not the real point of the story</i></p>	<p>building tension a second time now that the audience is trained. First starts to break the audience away from mechanical solutions again building for the formal moral and the sub-text message</p>
<p>They told me how they used to work – Storyteller builds picture of engineers meeting in a depot in the morning exchanging knowledge over a cup of tea, repeating the process in the evening. Then the evil consultants arrive and 'rationally identify that the engineers are wasting 16 minutes per man day drinking tea. They drive this out by automating the process with mobile phones and hand held computers, closing the depot, instituting redundancies. The engineers are being treated as cogs in a machine.</p>	<p>The normal rules is that the successive three should be successive. In this the rule has been broken to link the mind bending first with the 'little guy wins out' of the second. Rules can be broken, but only for good reason! The rational consultant (16 mins!) contrasts with the dowsing rods and builds the sub-text and empathy with the engineers. Also empathy with audience who have lived through similar experiences.</p>
<p>&lt;&lt;Pause&gt;&gt; After they trusted me, I was taken to their café – its on a bypass near the city in which they work. During the course of the day an engineer will call in once or twice and there will always be one of their mates there and they would drink tea and exchange information and knowledge. I estimate they are spending 32 minutes per day ..... <i>But that's not the real point of the story</i></p>	<p>The little guy wins out, they find a way out of the mechanical approach and its costs the company far more in time that when it was in the depot. Note use of verbal signal of a 'three' in the use of "<i>But that's not the real point of the story</i>" to signal a change.</p>
<p>&lt;&lt;Pause&gt;&gt; Story teller builds a verbal picture of sitting in the café one day when an engineer asks to look at the 'book' and then describes a large journal in which the engineers are writing down gossip, engineering work arounds, health and safety information and the like so that their "mates" can read it on their next visit.</p>	<p>Final three Establishes the social obligation of knowledge exchange in the sub text. Prepares the ground for the moral which will be drive home in two beats</p>
<p>Storyteller drives home the formal moral: social obligation and social space leads to natural knowledge flow. Formalisation and process focus does to achieve the results, and in practice makes it worse</p>	<p>This is a common sense message; most of the audience will have got this and will be reflecting on similar experiences of their own, vicarious or otherwise.</p>
<p>The trouble was the original consultants were still around. Their solution was to put a police guard on every café (stated as a semi-serious joke) and provide a new programme for the hand held computers so that this data can be entered in the field and efficiency can be restored (Rising crescendo)</p>	<p>Down beat, it may all go wrong again, the evil ones are still here.</p>



Fortunately they were losing credibility by now and we came up with a simpler solution – the café was made official in return for the managers being able to photocopy the book every Friday	The little guy is saved, a pragmatic solution is brought up, prepares for the second moral.
This makes the point about the need to separate the creation of knowledge from its analysis and distribution, tempting as it is to combine them	Second message
Mind you there was some opposition to the managers coming in on the Friday, but that was simple, we told the engineers to keep TWO books	Needs good timing but the audience will collapse. The they don't get the two books point straight away, drop the voice and add "the one the managers photocopy, and the OTHER ONE"

This fable has a total of eighteen sections, with two successive threes, two formal morals and a powerful sub-text; it is of average length. Its purpose is to make to audience realise that knowledge management is about recognising that knowledge can only ever be volunteered, it cannot be conscripted and in consequence a different, non mechanical form of consultancy needs to be used, that reflects the natural flows and social obligation of knowledge exchange. Like any good fable it can be heard many times with new meaning and insight gained on each occasion. Critically few if any members of the audience would be able to retell the fable from memory, or even if they could it would not have the same impact. This means that the storyteller controls the delivery and can maintain the messages. As such fable provides a controllable way of communicating a message without the diffusion that always accompanies a myth; the subtext in particular can be used to disrupt negative myths and the fable form itself can create a Myth Subject and its impact can be measured by the myths that arise as a result of its use..

What is important for a fable is the relationship between the storyteller and the audience. Whereas a gifted storyteller can use any material and weave magic around it we are looking here for a scalable method. People who are not gifted storytellers must be able to use the form in their day-to-day lives; this is not difficult, we all tell stories and their power comes from both their relaxed and casual use and their being rooted in our own experience which allows the story telling to be natural. In order to scale the use of fable it will need to be rooted in the current, or future, actual or desired experiences of the amateur storyteller. A seven stage process can achieve this:

1. Anecdotal material is gathered from the organisation, archetypes and organising principles are extracted, the anecdotes are deconstructed, the purpose determined and a fable is produced.
2. The storytellers, those who need to take responsibility for achieving the purpose are assembled for two workshops separated by a week or so with two one to one coaching sessions scheduled as a minimum in between.
3. The fable is told, discussed and refined as necessary and then each trainee storyteller is taught to tell the fable with the aid of a script, marked up for voice inflection but not yet analysed.
4. Once they understand it and have become half way competent, they are told that they may never tell that fable again; this can be a difficult moment for the facilitator.

5. The fable is now redistributed as text with all the sections identified together with notes about the way each section is used, the build to the sub-text and so on; in effect a more elaborate version of the example given above.
6. Each storyteller is now asked to write down, for each section his or her own equivalent experience; that experience can be direct or vicarious, but it must be real for the storyteller. Ideally the storyteller can be asked to go and gain the necessary experience. As the anecdotes used to create the model fable will have been gained from the organisation itself this is easy to arrange and may be instructive in its own right
7. In the final workshop the story tellers now tell their own stories, each one is different, but each conveys the same messages both formal and more importantly in the subtext, using a structure and form that will resonate with the organisation. Not only that, but each storyteller can now repopulate the story with new experiences as necessary without message dilution to create a living, effective and evolving communication.

In some cases it may be impossible for, say a senior executive, to carry out the anthropological work to gain personal experience within their own organisation. Impossible here may not mean impossible, but unacceptable. In this case they may do it in another industry, or the voluntary sector or whatever. Here the story may be even more effective as it will relate to experiences in another sector and can be used as a metaphor to break the audience out of current practice. There are dangers to this approach, but it is an option.

## **Virus**

There are three forms of story virus that are analogous to the three forms of partnership that one can have in nature. Two of these are ethical and one is not, but awareness of its natural use by political players in an organisation can be useful. Virus stories are used to disrupt negative myths. Never try and destroy a myth with fact, it won't work; the myth has developed despite the facts because people want to believe it. One combats or uses a story with a story. Virus stories can also be used to reinforce and build valuable myths and endorse good practice. Virus stories take considerable skill to effect and only a brief description is given here.

### **FIGURE TWO – THREE**

#### ***Predatory Virus***

A crocodile lunges from the river, snatches you off the bank, drowns you and eats you; you now have a profound and intimate relationship with the crocodile, although it may not be one that you desire! A predatory virus works in the same way. It embraces the myth form story that it wishes to destroy and retells it, but with increasing exaggeration of the message until it reaches the point where it is untenable for the original myth to survive. Examples of the use of this method include a myth used by salespeople to excuse a lost contract. Here there was an urban myth of a client who had realised the error of their ways, they had made the wrong decision and they would return to the fold. Each unsuccessful salesperson had convinced themselves that this would be the case with their client – a danger to the organisation as it meant little learning was taking place and it was also further evidence of arrogance, one of the organising principles in the form of a belief, that had emerged from the analysis of the anecdotes. A virus form story, using a fable structure delivered at a sales conference as after dinner entertainment, took this urban myth and exaggerated it in a succession of builds to the point where the urban myth was not told again for two years; nothing is ever permanent in this field of work.

### **Parasitical Virus**

The same impact as the crocodile, but you don't realise its happening until its too late. Here an existing myth is retold in a more compelling form, but in a casual and secret manner so that the myth destroys itself on subsequent retellings. This is not ethical and is not recommended. However all members of the organisation need to be aware of it. Individual reputations are destroyed in organisations by the use of parasitical story viruses. For example individuals with access to decision makers are able to re-describe actual incidents to the powerful in such a way as to build their own reputation and damage another's, or to claim credit for another's success. The most effective users of this technique will build on the public image of the individual they want to destroy and exaggerate it, and the credibility of the stories they create may mean that even the victim's friends believe it.

### **Symbiotic Virus**

A symbiotic relationship is one of mutual dependency, the bacteria in our digestive systems would not survive without us, and we would not survive without them. Symbiotic stories use existing story forms or Myth Subjects that are prevalent within the organisation and create new stories that are interwoven with the fabric of the existing story and the two become mutually dependent, one cannot be told without the other, but neither are destroyed. This form of story is difficult to achieve, but can be one of the most long lasting. It is often best achieved by using an existing myth as the Myth Subject of the symbiote that you want to achieve. Getting the CEO to tell strong stories will naturally lead to similar stories being told and created naturally within the organisation: subject always to the danger of the anti-story.

### **Archetypal**

The use of archetypes to tell stories has a long history. The Mulla Nasrudin stories in the Middle East range from century old stories of loosing a water bottle in the desert to modern day ones about the perils of encountering British Immigration at Heathrow! (Shah 1985). The Dilbert cartoons in our time use archetypes. Examples can be found in Cajun society and the use of animal archetypes in Native American and Aborigine cultures in Australia, to mention but a few of many. This is one of the most natural story forms in use.

One of the main uses of archetype stories is to create an indirect means of owning up to failure, or characterising good and bad behaviour. Dilbert exaggerates the self-serving stupidity of management and the cynical exploitation of management consultants. The Mulla Nasrudin stories allow Sufi society to pass on failure as a learning process without attribution of blame. In modern use, archetype stories can be used to dramatically improve eLearning and institute a more dynamic lessons learnt programme (Snowden 2000b). The Treasure Map Fable (*Spark op cit*) is an example of the use of universal archetypes, known though fairy stories to make a point.

Within Story as outlined in this pair of articles the construction of an archetype story starts with the process of archetype extraction described in Part I. Once these archetypes are isolated, they need to be refined and developed to the point where there are three, possibly four strong well-developed characters and a number of subsidiaries who will be used to a lesser extent. The critical difference with the use of universal or idealised archetypal stories is that the characters are drawn from the anecdotal base of the organisation with whom one is working. They thus have immediate and lasting relevance and gain traction quickly with the community. Dilbert works, but many other cartoon strips failed, we need more reliable and scalability in using story within organisations.

Archetype stories are one of the most long lasting of the story forms and one of the most easily integrated with other forms of communication; the characters can be used in corporate newsletters for example. A brief summary of the e-Learning and Lessons

Learnt project referenced above will illustrate the use of this technique. The project concerned was attempting to transfer a physical course to a virtual environment. In these circumstances one of the major issues is how to motivate people to proceed through the course, and how to measure their achievement and institutionalise the learning.

1. Anecdotes were gathered by attendance at the last physical course – stories told by trainers are well refined through re-telling and amongst the most useful.
2. The anecdotes were then analysed and archetypes extracted and refined as described earlier. The principal archetypes were Tom, Jason and Linda. Tom is the good guy, who everyone talks to, but no one listens to. Jason is the personification of the intellectual consultant and Linda is the ambitious practice leader.
3. Each module of the eCourse is then preceded with a spoken Tom, Jason and Linda story reinforced with cartoons.

This was not a major project, but it was extremely effective. The story element resulted in participants going through the material in half the time that it took for comparable courses without story, this was partly because the stated message and the sub-text of each story prepared the ground for the learning that was to follow, rather like a good teacher prepares you for the lesson that is to follow: the story provided context in a meaningful and entertaining form. The other reason it worked is that a soap opera format was used; after the first module went out e-mails were coming back saying "I've finished module one, can I have module two, I want to find out what happens to Jason!"

The benefits of this type of story are not confined to improving the learning process at the time of the course. They also introduce a private symbolic language to the community. One participant in the training to another can say, "You're doing a Jason" on a project, and only the participants will understand the reference. In one simple phrase several weeks of learning can be triggered in the field. In addition the post project review process can include the official story of what happened, which may or may not reflect the truth. The team can then be asked for any Tom, Jason and Linda stories, or whatever the archetype set is. The stories they create explore fictional space, but also allow people to tell the truth without attribution of blame, increasing the overall learning capability of the organisation. (Snowden 2000a). As for the Sufi's, the archetypes allow the truth to be told without stigma, and the community learns as a result in an organic and non-directive way; its is about lessons learnt not a best practice; best practice is usually past practice.

## **Applications, Warnings and Ethics**

In this two-part article, we have covered the process of anecdotal capture, the extraction of organising principles and archetypes, four story forms and different approaches to organisational story telling. The articles have only partially covered methods for story construction and have not covered subjects such as story representation and metaphorical environments; for that readers will have to wait for the book. Story is a large subject, encompassing many disciplines and with a host of techniques. Story work is a non-trivial technique of considerable power, used wisely with proper training and supervision. The last few years have seen a few examples of abuse, the most extreme of which was a consultant, who had a natural ability to create myths about his own capability but a blindness to bring in real expertise when it was needed, either to quote for the work or to execute: "Everyone tells stories, we don't need all these complications, I can do it myself". Needless to say the consequences were not good, although the consultant concerned escaped them, as experienced colleagues piled in without reward or acknowledgment to rescue the situation. The techniques described in these two papers have been five years in the creation with a lot of learning and mistakes along the way; it is not a field for amateurs.

In working through some of the implications of the techniques an ethic for story telling was devised by the various different groups in IBM who have worked on the area. This follows the principle outlined earlier by creating a set of organising principles:

1. The fact that story techniques are being used on a population must always be declared to that population, they must not be used covertly.
2. Any question, if asked, must be answered honestly: this controls clients who want to use story in a covert manner, "I'll do that, but if anyone asks me the question I'll have to tell them" is a great deflector!
3. For story creation projects intended for dissemination, although not for the use of story capture, and independent arbitrator should be appointed who can receive appeals against abuse of the technique.

This approach is far more effective than saying something nebulous like "we will not abuse individuals" which is too open to interpretation.

Story is an all-pervasive technique that provides a simple way of conveying complex ideas. As such there are many possible uses. A round dozen of current uses are listed below, but this list should not be taken as exhaustive. Some have already been mentioned, others are written up elsewhere, some are recent and are not yet published.

1. Cultural Measurement and target setting for managers using archetypes and values
2. Knowledge mapping exercises and strategy
3. Enhancement of eLearning environments
4. Lessons Learnt Programmes
5. Cultural Change through the morals and sub-text of fables
6. Oral Histories, using story techniques to create fictional stories that index the tapes of key incidents in an organisations history.
7. Knowledge repositories, fronting document repositories with stories o illustrate their use and creation of story environments for exchange of information about those documents
8. Reduction in induction time for new hires, by capturing common stories and incorporating them into training programmes
9. Merger, Acquisition and Partnerships to increase trust and reduce staff attrition most merger- cross value story telling using the anecdotes of one organisation with the value systems of the other and vice versa
10. Heuristic based strategy for managing under conditions of uncertainty
11. Brand creation and enforcement in service cultures.
12. Advanced decision support systems, where fast briefing of complex material is required to decision makers with little time.

Story telling is both an art and a science. The techniques described in these two papers increase the scientific element to allow the techniques to be used in a wider population without the need for gifted storytellers. It is also an art: some people never get it, they fail to understand that story is an organic technique and the more conventionally understood techniques of scientific management do not apply. Making story look like every other consultancy technique is a mistake, although understandable. To understand this, we will conclude with another story from Shah's collection of Mulla Nasrudin stories:

"Nasrudin found a weary falcon sitting one day on his window-sill. He had never seen a bird like this before. 'You poor thing', he said, 'how ever were you to allowed to get into

this state?' He clipped the falcon's talons and cut its beak straight, and trimmed its feathers. 'Now you look more like a bird,' said Nasrudin."

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