



The Living Story


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The Living Story

In defining the Living Story, we can look to Arie de Gues's definition of the "living company," drawn from his study of companies that are long-lived. "Like all organisms, the living company exists primarily for its own survival and improvement; to fulfill its potential and to become as great as it can be." (de Gues, *The living Company*, p. 11). The Living Story is related. It is the articulation of the past, present and future of a group or organization in story form, so that it expresses their identity, their current reality and their hopes and aspirations. It is the story of the path taken to fulfill potential and become as great as can be. Each of us is living our own story and the work we do together becomes a living story. As consultants, being able to recognize and articulate the living story—often transparent to those who are living it—is a great gift to our clients.

The living story is complete. It may not be fully realized, but it has a beginning, middle and an end that leads to a new beginning. Even when the Living Story is not yet complete, when there is tension between what is and what could be, it has energy, hope and promise. The characters and the action are not there, **yet**. It is often a story of commitment, joy and integrity, even in difficult conditions. A living story can "anoint role models, impart values, and show how to execute indescribably complex tasks." (Thomas A. Stewart) It is a story of learning shared with a community, of individuals becoming more than they believed possible. If it is not told until it is familiar, it can be dismissed as a fluke. If told well and often, it is woven into the fabric of our collective and individual identity and becomes the basis for new possibilities.

The Living Story, in anointing role models, imparting values and showing how to execute complex tasks, contains or implies five fundamental declarations. These are from the work of Julio Olalla. The first is "No." The living story sets boundaries, and shows what not acceptable behavior is. It makes it possible to decline, to promise not to do something. The second is "Yes." With a reliable "no" in the system, the living story shows how to promise or affirm certain actions and values. The characters can make and keep agreements. There is identity and definition for the self and the community or organization. The third is "I don't know." In a living story there is space for learning and people can admit their ignorance, ask their questions. Characters are not punished for learning. Fourth, in a living story, there is gratitude. There are ways and times to say "thank you" to one another and to the world. People know when agreements are complete because they are thanked for their contributions and are free to appreciate the steps in the journey and to move on to the next challenge. Finally, in a living story there is forgiveness. People know how to say "I'm sorry"




when they have unintentionally hurt someone. They can ask forgiveness as well. Not every living story is overtly about these fundamental conversations, but there is a space for all of them. An organization or individual that is lacking one or more will be, to some degree, less than fully alive.

We can instinctively differentiate the Living Story from the stagnating or dead end stories that we humans sometimes create and get lost in. Those stories are full of historical reasons for how things are, blame enough to go around, and assumptions of fixed identity. The deadening stories cycle endlessly. They are told over and over, sometimes passionately and sometimes with resignation, in the vain hope that by doing the same things we will get different results. The living story is not the circular story of “it’s always been this way” or “that’s just how things work around here” or “that is just the way I am.” The living story includes the possibility for learning and change, points the way to new futures. Listening to the cyclical stories drains the life out of individuals and organizations and the coaches and consultants who work with them. The Living Story is life affirming, life giving. It may need nurturing, but it lives.

Why Stories?

For the million or so years before human beings settled into farms and began lives of relative predictability, they gathered at night around campfires and told stories. Through those stories they learned from one another. They learned the signs that might tell them where the game hid, they learned of places where roots and tubers might grow, they learned where fresh water was to be found and where honey bees hid. And they learned, as well, of triumphing through cunning and courage, or sacrifices made by parent for children, of the power of love, of overcoming fear. They learned what behavior benefited the tribe and what behavior endangered it. They learned of the past and learned for the future “From stories, a child learns to “imagine a course of action, imagine its effects on others and decide whether or not to do it.” (*Scientific American*, October, 1994)

In the process the human brain became hardwired for holding complex information in story form and for learning through stories. Notice what happens when people hear the words “I’m going to tell you a story.” They relax. They open up. They listen. They become neurologically receptive to new information and new possibilities. The result of that state is that people retain more of what they hear, they internalize it and take it to “usability” more effectively. A story well timed and well told is vicarious learning, the next best thing to first hand experience (and in some instances where the experience could be life threatening, it may be the best thing.) In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article on “Strategic Stories,” the authors note that: “A good story (and a good strategic plan) defines relationships, a sequence of events, cause and effect, and a priority among items—and those elements are likely to be remembered as a complex whole.” (*Harvard Business Review*, 5-6/98, p. 42)




We are all storytellers, weaving together selected bits of the complex flow of life into some semblance of coherence. We are meaning making creatures and, in the absence of information or a shared story, we will fill in gaps with our own assumptions and create a story. Think of how quickly rumors spread and get told with increasing authority. Notice how two people will attend the same meeting and have very different reports. Our mood, our past experience, our culture, our gender, our beliefs are just some of the filters through which we sift the data of our lives and select our story. And this filtering process exists collectively in organizations as well. Stories are a form of language as action. In other words, in telling the story you are not simply “talking about”, you are being and doing the story. It not only expresses motivation, it motivates. It not only describes learning, it embodies, reflects and causes learning. As the group’s story evolves and grows, it becomes a vehicle through which the group can act “as if” and bring new ideas and worlds into being.

Just a note about storytelling: we are all storytellers, although we are not all professional storytellers. Because we spend so much time with media created by others, polished and edited and packaged, we have come to believe that storytelling belongs outside ourselves. So let’s be clear now. There are stories that fit in the sitcom time slot, there are stories that are told in a country and western song or a rap, and there are stories adapted for the screen. Those may have once been living stories. They are not necessarily living stories now. Living Stories are told by people in words and actions and silences. They may or may not be polished and rehearsed. They may not even be entertaining or “told well.” They may be all of those things or they may be very mundane. They are what is heard when “who you are thunders so loudly, I cannot hear what you say.” Another way to think of stories is a quote seen on a tee shirt in Malibu, CA. Attributed to Muriel Rukeyser, it reads, “The world is made of stories, not of atoms.” One of our spouses fondly remembers hot summer evenings on the back porch of his grandparents’ place in Texas listening to stories and watching fireflies. We don’t give ourselves much back porch time these days and we forget that each of us is telling a story. You can’t not tell your story. The questions are which story and how invitingly is it told.

The Story Being Lived

One of the things we ask ourselves as consultants and coaches is what is presently true for this organization, team, or individual? What is not yet realized? Where is the tension between what is and what could be. Gap analysis tells one story. The water cooler may hear another story. The balance sheet tells another. Each person we interview will tell us a selected version of the shared story. We all have our own stories of how organizations work. “Language is a medium through which we create new understanding and new realities, as we begin to talk about them. In fact, we don’t talk about what we see, we see only what we can talk about.” (Senge, et. al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*)

We constitute our relationships and our identities through language. What we declare changes reality. What we request, what we decline, what promises we make and what




promises we keep open and close possibilities for ourselves and for others. The questions we ask are the questions we will answer. The unimagined question is not answered. This leads to at least three powerful listening directions for the consultant. Listening for the metaphors within the organization, listening for what is not said—the unspoken and undiscussable story, and listening to and affirming the living story.

Metaphors can capture complex experiences in a phrase. Those metaphors contain both possibilities and limitations. One of the most profound shifts in understanding organizations is the moving from machine metaphors to organic metaphors for describing the organization in the work of Margaret Wheatley. Consider “the organization as machine” and “the organization as a living and learning system.” Consider the direction to “break into groups” in contrast to the direction to “form groups”. Consider the possibility for win-win solutions in an organization that “rallies the troops to crush the competition” or the possibility of individual meaning in “a well-oiled machine”. Are those who staff the plant closing “going down with the ship” or the crew of a proud, final voyage? Are managers growing the business or putting out fires? Is the organization a team, a family, a community of practice, a war zone...very different possibilities emerge. Sometimes shifting the metaphors will open new horizons.

What cannot be said consumes the energy of the organization. It takes effort to suppress thoughts and feelings. It takes effort to walk around the unacknowledged “elephant in the room”. It takes resources to feed and house the elephant. Sometimes our work is to help the organization name the elephant.

Listening for the living story is sometimes a matter of hearing through the problem stories for the exceptions. Sometimes we can go directly for the living story with Appreciative Inquiry or other interventions that ask “What works here?” When something new and wonderful happens, we need pause and listen. We need to make a space for the new to be storied until it becomes part of the familiar, the fabric. Particularly in a fast changing environment, “current reality” may be coming faster than the stories can keep up with it. This is not trivial. In the words of Thurman Arnold, an American lawyer, “Men believe that a society is disintegrating when it can no longer be pictured in familiar teams. Unhappy is a people that has run out to words to describe what is going on.” A group or individual does something extraordinary and there is no moment of recognition, no narrative of what happened, much less learning phase of “So What?” or the growing phase of “Now What?” Without reflection there is no learning. If we want to have learning in organizations there must be time and space for reflection. There is nothing like telling the story and really listening to it, to bring out the “what”, the “so what” and the “now what” of an innovation or a challenge well met. We also owe it to individuals to keep our stories up to date. If we want people to change and grow, we need to keep updating our stories of whom and how they are or we will miss the very behavior we have been working toward developing in them. This is true within us as well. Keeping our stories current is part of listening for the living




story. A living story is constantly unfolding, so if you haven't listened for awhile the story has changed.

Telling the Story

The story is being told, intentionally or not. Being intentional about telling stories means that we choose to give airtime and heart space to the living stories, the stories that are generative, that will bring new awareness and open possibilities. This can be done in words, images or movement or combinations. Most important is a relationship of respect and responsiveness between teller and listeners. As master storyteller Ed Stivender says, "The only good story is a live story, told responsively, respectfully of the widows and orphans in the house and responsibly to the etiquette of the tribes and wigwams where you work." (*The Storyteller's Guide*, p. 48) As storytellers we use the beginning, the middle and the end, the words and silences, the details and the ambiguities, to connect with the listeners and invite them into the story. At the same time, we invite the listeners to stand outside the story and hear it from a new perspective, one of reflection and learning. We hold our sense of their story lightly, and instead, tell the story in response to the listener. We make a space for the listener to think in and include ideas to think about. We touch the five senses and the heart. And we use the silences within the story to allow the listener to make the story their own. Storytelling is a practice. We shape our story to our audience, telling the living story with respect for the uniqueness of the listeners at every moment of each telling. We respect the ability of the organization or individual to make the meaning they need for the story at a given moment in time.

Stories give structure to complex interactions like change processes, team interactions, growing a business, making hard decisions. Ultimately, every story is a variation of what Joseph Campbell called "The Hero's Journey." The individual or group leave the know world—their past—for a variety of reasons, and, and on the journey, enters the "pit" where lies the monster. The monster, in actuality a reflection of their needs to grow and develop, must be confronted and the learning done in order for the heroes to complete the journey, changed in the process and ready for new action. Too many stories get stuck in the pit, afraid to meet the monster or accept uncertainty or allow change. Similarly, there are archetypal family patterns that help us understand a project or group: the need for nurturing during childhood, the period of adolescent rebellion testing the boundaries and oneself, and then maturation into productivity and generativity. The dynamics of group development are captured in forming, storming, norming and performing. "Stories are fractals. They are necessary, basic and dangerous in that they can't be controlled by our striving intellects. They are the container, the elements, the process and the trigger of transformation" (Cary and Underwood, *Learning Organizations*, p. 129)

Telling the group story makes each individual story theirs as well, makes it one story of which they want to be a part, want to see through to the outcome. As you are telling it, you are watching for what's working, what's resonating, what's stirring people. Even though you



may be telling them their own words, they're learning as they listen, learning about what is most deeply meaningful to them about their own story. Like the fish that can't see water, we don't always know our own story. We don't always know where our deepest motivations lie. And there is a profound deepening of our own experience when we hear it as a story, a deepening that enables us to move more purposefully, to engage our passion and focus and bring ourselves more fully into our lives when we hear and recognize our own Living Story.

All aspects of hearing and telling the living story are natural gifts to be developed. They are part of our innate drive to make meaning in our lives. As coaches, we are part of that quest for meaning in individuals, organizations and communities. We are part of the living story. We are in service as we hear and tell the living story, participants in creation of the future to which we want to belong.