

## Only the Shadow Knows: Increasing Organizational Polyphony with Liminal Story/telling

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### ABSTRACT

Written through the lens of the practitioner-scholar, this paper integrates first-hand experience with theory to explore the tension between positive scholarship and the Metamorphosis Model proposed by Boje (2005) in the context of the emerging workplace practice of systematically applying story/telling. In particular it examines the importance of shadow stories, potent stories from the liminal spaces of the organization, and their implication for organizational practitioners who are latching on to the emerging trend to formally or systematically integrate story/telling into their practice. It draws on the practical experience blended with the qualitative research of the author on the systematic use of stories in for-profit organizations. It does not problematize systematic, performed storytelling as a strategic process, but for the purposes of this paper accepts it as a popular contemporary trend. A preliminary set of reflective questions for practitioners who have chosen to participate in systematic storytelling are included with the intent of challenging practitioners to widen the angle of their listening lens and deepen their practice through an understanding and inclusion of liminal stories.

Keywords: storytelling, positive scholarship, organizational development

*"Elisha Graves Otis establishes his elevator factory. The next year, at the New York World's Fair, he proves his new product's safety mechanism: As he rides up and down upon the platform, (he) occasionally cuts the rope by which it is supported....The New York Recorder's official artist, who had been idling all morning beneath the palms, set busily to work with his block and pencil, on a drawing which would be reproduced thousands of times and come to decorate Otis offices around the world, illustrating an event that has long since eclipsed the bigger show it was a part of. It wasn't Otis going up that dazzled the crowd-it was Otis not coming down with a crash after he slashed the hoisting rope with a saber. 'All safe, gentlemen,' he announced, as the brakes kicked in. 'All safe....' For when Otis had severed the hoisting rope with his saber, the lift had fallen only a few inches, then stopped with a jolt. The mechanism was simple, it was automatic, and it promised to make the hoist safe for the first*

*time in 2,000 years. By executing this stunt, before a gasping crowd, Otis had heralded the birth of the elevator industry."*



Text and Images from the United Tech-

nologies Web Site (2006).



By way of introduction, we have here this striking image, this artifact, a dazzling and classic story of an iconic hero-founder. It is a story embedded with messages to employees, customers and other stakeholders about the company as an organization that is not only grounded in innovation, but is imbued with a grand meta-value of safety. It assures investors that it is safe to include Otis in their portfolios. Customers understand that they buy a history of safety when they purchase Otis products. Employees, hearing this story as part of their new employee orientation learn that they stand on the shoulders of a heritage that renders safe their participation in manufacture, installation and service of Otis products. The focus on safety in training classrooms, in factory hallways and on the walls, reinforces this message: Otis means safety. These texts reinforce an implicit pact: Employees have a role in upholding this heritage, a shared responsibility with “the company” for making sure that they, the firm and its products are, indeed, “all safe.”

This story matters because the vertical transportation business - the business of elevators and escalators - is indeed a

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dangerous one.<sup>5</sup> It *needs* stories of safety, and not just to create an image that will serve it well in the marketplace. In a constructivist sense, companies like Otis need to create a reality that will serve its people well against the backdrop of the work-a-day hazards of the field.

And still, despite its every effort to train, to persuade, to coerce its employees into a “safe mode,” this story of Elisha Graves Otis at the New York World’s Fair is not Otis’ whole safety story. It is not the only safety story. The 146 industry related deaths that the eLCOSH website reports occurred between 1992 and 2001 included 57 installers and repairmen.<sup>6</sup> So there are, it’s clear, other stories. They run the gamut of stories from “close calls” to “pure accidents” and a dozen shades in between. They are no less true than “All Safe, Gentlemen. All Safe,” but they are not “produced” with affiliated images and texts. They are not included on the company website, in the materials for the investors, or on the bulletin

<sup>5</sup> Incidents involving elevators and escalators kill about 30 and seriously injure about 17,100 people each year in the United States, according to data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Injuries to people working on or near elevators - including those installing, repairing, and maintaining elevators, and working in or near elevator shafts - account for 14- 15 (almost half) of the deaths. The two major causes of death are falls and being caught in/between moving parts of elevators/escalators.” From the eLCOSH (Electronic Library of Construction Occupational Safety and Health) website. <http://www.cdc.gov/elcosh/docs/d0300/d000397/d000397.html>

<sup>6</sup> “More than half of the deaths of those working in and around elevators - especially electrocutions and “caught in/between” and “struck by” deaths - were caused by failure to de-energize elevator electrical circuits or failure to ensure that elevator parts could not move while maintenance or repairs were under way. These causes resulted also in three of the five work-related escalator deaths.” *ibid.*

boards in the break-rooms. These are stories from the literal shadows of an elevator shaft, the top of a car, the back corner of a machine room, the pit of an escalator. They are stories that paint a sharp contrast to the message of safety as value, safety as priority, and they are not stories that enjoy regular telling at new employee orientation. But they are told. Let me tell you one. It's one in which I had some direct involvement during my tenure in the industry.<sup>7</sup>

*There is a procedure called "lock out/tag out." Mechanics are supposed to use it when they work on live equipment. It's more than just shutting the machine down. It's a process of isolating the machine from the power source, and then putting a bright tag on the power panel or switches so that they will not be restored to power until the services tasks are complete.*

*Over a decade ago, two mechanics went on the job at a department store to adjust a shaky escalator. They were behind schedule, and agreed that one would get to work while the other went to fetch some hot drinks for both of them. The remaining mechanic shut off the escalator and set up orange cones around the bottom of the escalator platform. Between the cones he strung bright tape declaring "danger" to passersby. Working from inside the taped zone, he began to take up the stair treads of the escalator, stopping for a while to chat with the manager of the store.*

*Now, in order to service an escalator, you pull up the stair treads, separating them at the line of their interlocking metal "teeth." Lifting up the bottom*

*landing reveals a small escalator "pit." By standing in the pit, the mechanic can reach the principle mechanisms to service them. And, while standing in the pit, the mechanic's belly is just about in line with the jagged, alternating teeth of the exposed tread.*

*On this particular day in the department store, as the mechanic kneeled, bending over the equipment in the pit, a noise caught his attention. He rose up a bit so as to more easily identify the source of the sound when he caught sight of the moving stair tread. Alarmed, he began to straighten, just as the teeth of the tread-edge bit into his belly, home to soft and vital organs.*

*His screams confused his buddy who, sure that the mechanic would have finished the job in the time it had taken him to return with coffee and tea had, in the absence of a tag, assumed that his associate had simply forgotten to restore power to the unit. In the long seconds that it took the returning mechanic to realize that the screams were from the front of the escalator, the teeth had perforated the mechanic's skin, puncturing and crushing his tender innards. Horrified, his buddy pulled the switch down, turning the unit off. He ran to help pull the treads back and release his friend to the emergency medical technicians who swept him off, lights flashing, sirens wailing.*

The story swept through the organization. How had it really happened? A terrible accident. Sloppy work. Poor partnership. Inadequate training. Bad scheduling, and too much pressure to make their call time statistics work. Different versions of the story appeared at different levels and in different functions of the organization. While the workers waited to hear about the condition of their colleague, management met on the seventh floor and speculated about workman's compensation claims. They discussed the possibility of the

<sup>7</sup> At the time of this story I was a training and development manager for a wholly owned, overseas subsidiary of Otis. I tell this story through the lens of my own experience and recollection by way of providing a first-hand example from the industry.

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mechanic suing the firm, which was, after all, an American company. They crafted plans to address various scenarios - "endings" to the story that ranged from "probable" to "unlikely but possible." It was indeed, they concurred, an unfortunate accident.

I first heard the story when I was called into that meeting on the seventh floor. It was not "all safe." No one invoked the great founder story. No one talked about history. They talked about the future. It was a nervously legalistic conversation intended to foster damage control and shift the ending of the story in a way that would best suit the local management team and the big shots at corporate headquarters. Meanwhile, on the floors below, out on the street, the story was streaming through the organization, listeners straining to discern new details in each version they heard, and incorporating them into the next version they, themselves, would tell.

### **Systematic Strategic Storytelling as Organizational Development Trend**

As evidenced in both the literature (Denning 2001, 2005; Garguilo, 2002, 2005; Simmons, 2001) and in practice (Tyler, 2004) there is a growing interest in the systematic use of story and storytelling in the workplace, particularly by very senior management who have been persuaded of the power of the sorts of stories - reasonably authentic, crafted personal narratives - that conform to the ideals of the types of stories emerging in the US as the grist of the storytelling revival (Sobol, 1999).

When I tell "All Safe, Gentlemen, All Safe," to groups of business practitioners, the story yields appreciative nods from the listeners. "Yes," they say, "this is exactly the sort of story we need/have/want/should/will tell in our company. It will send the right sorts of messages about who we are, about why/how we matter." In their minds' eyes' they situate themselves in the role of corporate storyteller. They've read the

popular trade literature (Denning 2001, 2005; Garguilo, 2002, 2005; Simmons, 2001, Seely Brown et al, 2005; Wacker and Silverman, 2003), and in a few cases they've learned that this process of storytelling is supported by qualitative research (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000; Tyler, 2004). They've "bought into" the currency of storytelling as another tool in their toolkit, another trick of the trade. They've come to my workshop to learn about the ways other practitioners are using story so that they, too, can avail themselves of the competitive advantage they believe it will provide, and this story about Otis fits with their expectations about how story can be used, or as they prefer to say, applied to the advancing of the strategic and tactical goals of their organizations.

The very decision to "apply" stories obviously is rife with power implications. It implies a locus of decision-making about which stories, whose voices, will be systematically lifted up for increased visibility, and in what spaces, by whose ears, those stories will be heard. In practice this is as much a process of deciding what to "leave out," as it is one of deciding which stories will be sanctioned for telling, for broader distribution across the organizational community, and for archival, for preservation across the fullness of time - like "All Safe, Gentlemen, All Safe" - for subsequent generations of listeners in the organizational community.

Human resource practitioners, organizational developers, trainers and knowledge managers are all scrambling to get under the skin of the power of storytelling, and in/corporate it into their own set of powers. Their espoused goals are to use storytelling for the good of the organization, to foster learning (Argyris, 1999; Marsick and Watkins, 1999) and the transfer of both implicit and explicit knowledge (Dierkes et al, 2003; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Metaphorically, these practitioners approach stories as tools, not as living spirits (Boje, 2001; Tyler, 2004). Stories are typically seen as freely available

in the organization, and freely dispensable at the practitioner's discretion. The trade literature promotes this utilitarian, commercial approach to story, encouraging practitioners to use stories as a powerful means of persuasion (Simmons, 2001), of inspiring and catalyzing followers (Denning, 2005), of distilling experience into tidy sound-bites that can be sensibly indexed and quickly retrieved. As means to an end, practitioners typically appear to accept without question the notion that stories can be collected, archived, transcribed, manipulated, merged, reified, and more, in ways that suit their purposes (Tyler, 2004).

Attracted to the idea that something as "simple" as stories can help to advance their goals, they carve out time to come to workshops, ranging from one to three days. Having made the decision to attend, practitioners express expectations that they will be given formulas, rubrics and job aids for working through the process of systematically finding and choosing the "right" stories, that they will learn the secrets of sculpting and then telling them so that their impact is visceral, immediate and measurable with respect to the bottom line. A line of discussion about who in the organization can authentically hold the story, who can authentically tell it, seems surprising to many practitioners, and not necessarily germane. They are concerned mostly with the stories that they believe should be told, the stories they want to tell. They are not terribly interested in any questions raised by the stories that are *not* chosen for public appearance, or by the process of not choosing them. Rather than reflect on these matters, practitioners who want their money's worth from the workshop want time to practice, to develop neatly packaged modern stories with orderly plot lines, archetypal characters, clear morals and happy endings that mirror the

desired future state for their organizations.<sup>8</sup>

*The mechanic is going to survive. Every one on the seventh floor agrees that this is good news. Fine news, indeed. It is true, he will never fully recover, but he is a "lucky" man. Despite his disabilities he will heal sufficiently to be functional. It is true, he will not be able to return to work in the field - but surely he will not want this anyway? Surely he will want to agree on some sort of settlement, and live a quiet life outside the industry. On the sixth floor, more specific contingency planning commences with lawyers murmuring over their computers and cold coffee in specialized tongues.*

### Positive Scholarship as Organizational Development Trend

The popularizing of positive or appreciative theories as philosophy, as a field of scholarship and as processes in the context of organizational development and change (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney & Yaeger, 2000; Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003; Cameron, Dutton & Quinn 2003), is having a growing impact on the way practitioners view their organizations and approach their practice. In my graduate classes in organization development and change<sup>9</sup>, practitioners are often initially suspicious of the notion that capitalizing on the positive aspects of the organization can yield growth, innovation, competitive advantage and the like (Hammond, 1998). In her introduction to Cooperrider's work on Appreciative Inquiry, Hammond acknowledges that this cynicism requires

<sup>8</sup> Observations from workshop settings come from the author's experience and data gathering in the workshops for business practitioners and for professional storytellers resulting from her dissertation research (Tyler, 2004).

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temporary suspension, assuring us that once we experience it (Hammond, 1998, p. 9), we will be convinced of the tenets of the positive lens. Inculcated in deficit problem solving models, in the definition of learning as the detection and correction of error (Argyris, 1996), a first hand experiment does seem to be required to convince practitioners of the values embedded in taking a positive approach in the context of organizational work. Still, after only a small taste, an appreciative hors d'oeuvre as it were, many of my students quickly become converts. They begin to examine their workplaces for ways to apply the approaches (typically stopping short, however, of a full blown Appreciative Inquiry). And despite their own tendency to slip into deficit problem solving language and thought patterns during this exploration, it is not unusual for them to chastise their colleagues, whenever they catch them manifesting negativity, for being stuck in a positivist paradigm focusing on bottlenecks, on solving problems and fixing what's broken.

Appreciative Inquiry is an alternative approach, situationally successful. And, as a practitioner I find there is nothing inherently wrong, and much to like about AI and some other forms of positive intervention (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn 2003). Alone and especially in combination with other non-positive, but equally story-based interventions, such as Action Learning, Appreciative Inquiry has helped practitioners in my client organizations come to understand the power of both story and storytelling. (The distinction here is between all the stories living in, fabricating and being produced by the organization, and those which become part of the story/telling process by being narrated, either informally or formally and either voluntarily or coercively. (Boje, 2001; Schein, 1999)) This alone is a worthwhile result, as it opens up new ways of talking about the organization as a "storytelling organization" (Boje, 1991, 1995). It is a compelling approach with an increasing amount of research to support it

in various permutations and settings as a useful form of organizational intervention.

It does however have the effect of putting pressure on practitioners to behave heliotropically (Cooperrider et al, 2003), to turn their own faces to the light. Pressed, as they typically are, against an ingrained backdrop of powerful deficit-problem solving ideologies, practitioners are often quite happy for an excuse to finally turn away from the shadows - shadows that they have been peering into, mucking about in, on the backs of such interventionist approaches as business process re-engineering and total quality. One can hardly blame them for luxuriating in the possibility that an exclusive focus on the positive can bring results that equal or exceed the yield from their depressing and demoralizing counterparts drawn from the scientific method and the concept of the linear curve associated with continuous improvement.

Unfortunately, the ancillary effect of this heliotropic move is that it draws the attention of the practitioner away from the challenging, sticky (and therefore important) stories that thrive in those shadows. It feels like a relief to "learn" that "constant re-affirmation [and]... creating the condition for organization-wide appreciation...is the single most important act that can be taken to ensure the conscious evolution of a valued and positive future" (Cooperrider et al, 2003, p. 18). And it feels like a relief to turn away from the mysteries of the organization that lurk in those shadowy corners where the dominant story/telling disconnects from the facts. It is a comfort to learn from "the experts" that declining to turn toward the shadow stories will cause those stories to wither, to lose their voice and their capacity to influence the organization's discourse and, in turn, its course of action. But there is this one problem: it isn't true. (Tyler, 2004)

## Voices from the Shadows

Appreciative Inquiry and other interventions aimed at collecting only a target slice of stories based on limited attributes - only positive stories, only stories about coming back from great strife, only stories about innovation - that are ostensibly tied to a specific organizational goal leave too many stories on the table. Practitioners who look for stories that align with the organization's espoused operation are likely to discover positive, brilliant stories with happy endings, and it will seem obvious that these stories should be told. Stories of, for example, new product success, teamwork, exemplary leadership in difficult times, major business deals, or the development of new markets, all support the notion that the organization can live up to its espoused vision, values, etc. They are stories that are relatively easy to craft and fun to tell. It is tempting as a practitioner to select these stories, and only these stories, for increased visibility inside the organization.

But if a practitioner listens well, if a practitioner is trusted in the organization - an admittedly problematic notion that can sometimes be overcome by the presence of a neutral third party such as a research partner - or if the organization contains or is connected to spaces for informal storytelling where authentic experience can bubble up to the surface, other stories will emerge that are difficult or negative, revealing a darker side, the shadow side of the organization. These shadow stories may reveal actual practices in the organization that are difficult, sad, negative, and typically out of alignment with the espoused organizational texts. They are often drawn from the depths and the margins of the organization, places where real work is accomplished, but where there is little visibility to the leadership of the organization. Examples of these stories are the middle manager who was in an executive meeting on Friday, but whose office was empty the following Monday; the "high-potential" lesbian who was threatened by management and repeatedly denied

promotions; the disabled applicant who was never interviewed because he was "over-qualified;" the scientist who believed the corporate propaganda about risk-taking and was fired when his experiment cost the company a quarter of a million dollars; the reorganization effort that was explained as a way to increase productivity and resulted in laying off 21 workers just short of their full-retirement. And, lest we forget, the mechanic who was crushed, permanently disabled, by an escalator.

*What would he be asking for? How could we compensate him so that he will be less inclined to sue? How can we settle? Who has talked to him since he left the hospital? How is he adjusting? Who has he been talking to? Who has the straight story? Who can give us the inside track? People must be talking out in the field. Go find out, but be discreet, eh? Don't cause a stir....*

The failure to recognize the voices from the liminal spaces of the organization results in practitioners whose truncated listening cannot properly interpolate discourse because the high and low frequencies, some portion of the "social voices of the era" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 430) are excluded. Without the advantageous richness of the high strings and low basses that anchor the curve of the discourse, the practitioner is at risk for "producing" single-faceted monophonic story/telling that fits neatly with the prevailing narrative and Bakhtin's concept of authoritative discourse. This whitewashed, sanctioned story/telling typically lacks the reflexive properties that make stories appealing to business listeners (Tyler, 2004). And it just makes marginalized listeners mad.

To the organizational practitioner, lifting these liminal stories up for public consumption may feel risky, since they can expose the gap between the organization's espoused theory and its theory-in-use. But the greater risk may lie in not selecting them

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for inclusion in the strategic storytelling process. In telling only the positive stories, there is danger that storytelling can become a tool for propaganda, for persuasion and manipulation. Employees will see the storytelling effort as an attempt by management to gloss over real difficulties. One way of diffusing that danger lies exactly in telling those difficult stories - the stories that contain shadow, move beyond that which is "politically correct," and address what the listeners privately know - the stories that listeners tell each other after work or over coffee. Telling these stories, moving them out of the shadows and into the light, can remove the potency they have when they remain publicly undiscussable, and give them new potency as an element of public organizational discourse. But it takes, on the part of the practitioner, some degree of courage to pursue these stories, create spaces in which they can be told/heard/discussed/explored, and a willingness to live with and work through the unanticipated and unintended consequences of liberating them from the shadows.

Practitioners who shy away from these stories imperil not only their own credibility, but the credibility of all stories that appear to be sanctioned by the organization by virtue of their systematic, strategic dissemination. After all, a full range of stories is already being told in the organization, contributing to the discourse in a lively and powerful way. Practitioners who ignore stories that are difficult - for whatever reason - run the risk of appearing naïve at best and manipulative at worst. Raising the visibility of "true" shadow stories is an act of courage that will not go unnoticed by the members of the organization. Linking these stories, in the spirit of strategic storytelling, directly to the goals of the business, and providing time for critical and honest reflection about these stories, can shift their power and potential away from suspicion and unrest, directing it instead toward learning and directed action. Moving these stories out of whispered corridor conversations and into the bright

light of public scrutiny makes them more constructive contributors to the discourse - and the payoffs can be dramatic. Bruce, a facilitator and independent consultant, explained in his interview how important it was to provide time and space for a negative story in a health services organization:

We were really striving to get positive stories because this whole thing was about expanding the employees' love of the work, their value, all that. During the kickoff meeting...one story caused the whole group to become quiet. It was a little bit stunning....It helped me understand how a poignant story, a hard story, a sad story, can turn things, because then someone said, "Do we want this? And can this change?" Even though it was a negative story, it was a story that helped them make a choice. I'm not sure we would have gotten that unless we sat in the muck for a while. (Tyler, 2004)

Listeners from the liminal spaces in the organization have the power to act as a critical toggle-switch in the success/failure of organizational development and change. All too often they are unable to find themselves in the stories they hear told in the organizations' primary communication spaces. They cannot situate themselves in story/telling (Bandura, 1986) that patently fails to reflect their work and the organizational context as they know it. Instead, they hear stories from a world of work - of social and physical processes - that fails to represent them/their work in ways that matter.

They hear an attempt to replace their stories with sanctioned story/telling of those in power that represents, instead, the espoused theories (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Brookfield, 1987) of the organization. As their voices are officially silenced, their stories ignored/denied, these listeners will tune out the systematized, sanctioned



story/telling in favor of representing their own experience of the organization's theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Brookfield, 1987). There is no implication that these shadow stories will simply dissipate, as is suggested by the literature associated with positive approaches. They are not squeezed out by the official stories narrated in the primary spaces, the stories that align with, reinforce, and attempt to reproduce the espoused ontology of the organization. Indeed, the marginalized listeners, the owners/caregivers of the shadow stories, are likely to dial-up the intensity of their story/telling in an effort to counter those authoritative stories with their gallant heroes and happy endings (Tyler, 2004). Instead, their stories of the hegemony of the culture, the points of separation from the "corporate story," will comprise in large measure their internally-persuasive, ongoing and often powerful contribution to the organizations' discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 424). Deprived of primary spaces, sanctioned air-time in which they can make this contribution, they will fine tune the channels of their social networks, using the stories as lubrication for clear transmission of their experience. Attempts to shut these stories down appear to make them stronger, not weaker. Practitioners end up trying to do damage control, create spin, consuming energy that would have been better suited to giving them voice sooner in forums where their meaning could be explored, their implications for the organization's story examined, where they could exhibit their power as a source of connection, or of novelty.

*The mechanic is back on his feet, and wants to arrange to come the office to visit with some of his colleagues. He calls me, the manager of training and development to make an appointment. Surprised, I tell him I'll be happy to see him, and we fix the day and time. I mention it to the folks on the seventh floor. "He sees you as safe," they suppose. "You need to talk him out of suing us. Make sure he understands*

*that we want to work with him on this."*

*A few days later, sitting in my office drinking tea, the mechanic leans towards me a little. "Do you think they're going to fire me? I mean, I know it was my fault, sloppy work. I was in a hurry. It was a huge mistake and I've paid the price, right? And I know I can't ever work in the field again, but I have an idea. I just don't want them to fire me."*

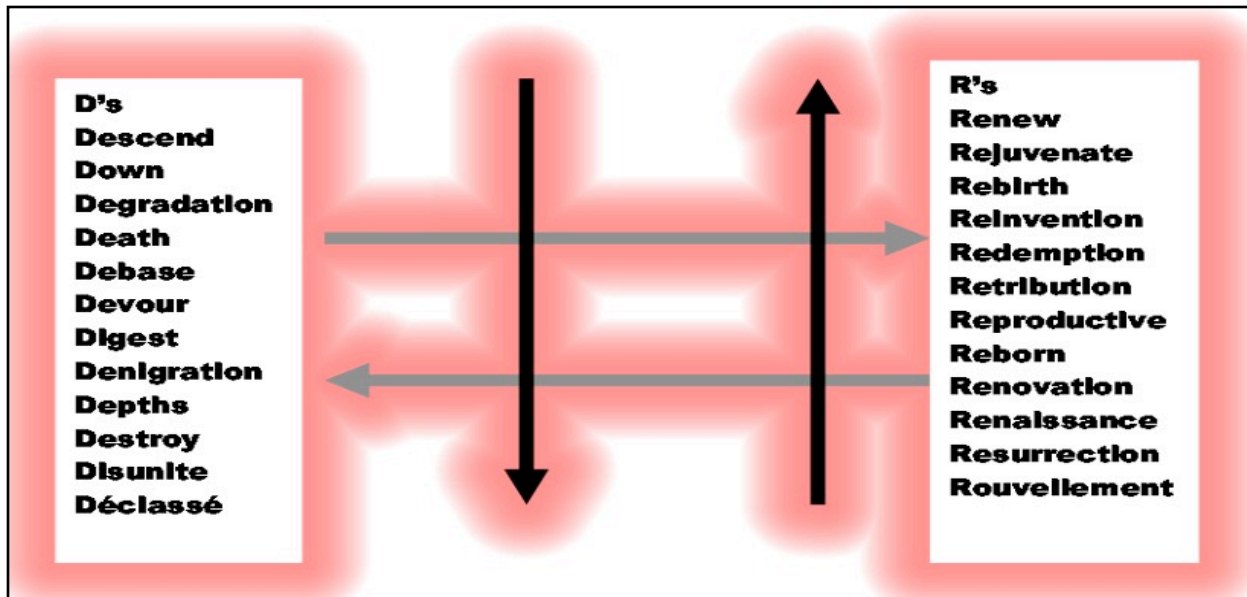
*"They won't fire you," I assure him. "What's your idea?"*

### **Courageous Application of the Metamorphosis Model**

It is very nearly tradition in the practice of HR/OD to build on the shoulders of giants: What are the big companies doing - GE, Nike, Google? Once they demonstrate the efficacy of a new technique, process or approach, that's the ticket for the smaller, more cautious players to jump on the bandwagon.

Pointing out that this imitative approach is no way to gain competitive advantage does little to shift this obsession to model the big guys. Crafting a new interpretation of work, changing one's own relationship to his or her practice, these are acts of courage, and they are all too rare.

So the idea of bridging trends and traditions, of triangulating some of our fundamental understanding of why stories are powerful, of why capitalizing on the best of what is (Cooperrider, 2003) and the traditions of action research and other problem-based approaches by using a new model is not any easy one for practitioners to translate from theory into the workplace. Still, thoughtful and courageous practitioners can benefit from the implications of Boje's Bakhtin-rooted Metamorphosis Model, depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 - Descending and Renewing Forces of Metamorphosis**  
 (Boje et al; Retrieved 12/2005 <http://scmoi.org/ODCtrack.htm>)

One of its practical uses may lie solidly in the way it reframes the role of what are typically seen at best as difficult (Niemi & Ellis, 2001), and at worst as dangerous stories (D words, though not Bakhtin's) - those stories which I refer to as the shadow stories - and from the way it can be seen as balancing the premise of positive inquiry with the "Descending and Renewing Cycles of Metamorphosis" (Boje, 2005). Indeed, there are parallels between Cooperrider's vocabularies of human/organizational deficit with D-Words of it's own - depressed, defensive, dissatisfaction, Dilbert, disabilities (2003, p. 17) and Bakhtin's D-Words. The notion of the interplay between what practitioners recognize as the reality of the shadows (D-Words) and the R-Words they strive for in narrowing the gap between the organization's espoused theories and its theories in use is not a huge or totally contradictory leap from Cooperrider's proposal to "break through the negative vocabulary framework...[by applying] an affirmative vocabulary of organizing for the future" (2001, p. 17) or from Ludema's "vocabularies of hope" (2001). The language of the Metamorphosis Model is no

less trivial than the language of positive scholarship. And given that it embodies an organizational ebb along with the flow, as it were, it can be used to trigger deep and unusual practitioner reflection with respect to identifying points of possible story narration within the organization. If Gandhi is correct, as Cooperrider believes him to be, that "words create worlds" (2003), then it behooves practitioners to consider carefully the possibility that language associated with the R-words may in fact rely on D-words (and the processes they represent) for their conception in organizational experience. The language of the D and R forces of the Metamorphosis Model embraces the language (R) that appeals to the proponents of positive scholarship, myself included, at the same time that it appears to allow for a full-bodied, multi-sensoried recognition of the organization's shadows and the stories that emerge and take up residence there. It opens up a channel to not only sanction and encourage the telling of these stories, but to build polyphony, the potential for dialogism - "the constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426) - and the creation of a novelistic environment

where, as Cooperrider (2003) would in turn agree, novelty, continuity and transition (Collins & Porras, 1994) are all made more possible.

From a practice perspective, it is in part the dually cyclic relationship of stratification and social heteroglossia that holds promise with respect to giving practitioners a model for considering the use of shadow stories. Conveniently, the adoption of organic metaphors for organizations (Morgan, 1986; Capra, 1996, 2002; Marshak, 2002) has helped practitioners to see their organizations (including the sub-components which comprise it and the industry in which it is contextualized) more as participants in a natural evolution cycle.

The ideas of degradation and death, for example, are not new concepts, but since they appear to be rather terminal in nature they are states to be avoided rather than embraced. The idea of reinvention and reproduction resonate with the concepts of innovation and increasing market share respectively, and are highly desirable. The terror of achieving them, in current and historical models of organization development, is the apparent impossibility of stabilizing or freezing in that state. The Metamorphosis Model implies that there is a natural cycling, a natural letting down or descension. The stories lurking in liminal shadows, often literally in the bowels of the organization (where dimensions of work and workers are devoured and digested) can help familiarize organizational members at all levels with the D cycle before and during their experience with it. These stories can do more than help make sense of the current phase of the cycle. They can help the process of re-ennobling the various dimensions of the conditions "so that they may be reproduced or regenerated differently" (Boje, 2005).

Of course, the complexity for the practitioner comes from the premise that the *whole* organization will never be moving through the Metamorphosis Model uniformly

or at anything close to a uniform speed. At the level of its smallest component, the individual worker, there may be great disparity. Colleagues may be moving ahead of one another, even surpassing the evolution of larger components, for example, departments or business units, which may in turn be moving at chaotic rates that appear to be counterproductive and disunifying - which may or may not be the case. Stories from people and units at various stages along the model, moving through the model at varying rates of grace and speed, some in small, tight trajectories that are easy to trace, others in wide arcs that are more difficult to follow, may in fact inform the "progress" of each other, and the organization as a whole. If so, this suggests the need for stories of all sorts - R Word Stories and D Word Stories - to be told in multiple configurations (separately, tandemly, collaboratively) in ways and spaces perhaps literally informed by the Tamara context of the storytelling organization (Boje, 1995). Since the metamorphosis is not linear, and since the stories never were (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2001), the challenge to practitioners is to develop spaces in which the stories can be heard and explored through the lens of the Metamorphosis Model, prompting, for example, experiments with the co-creation of new stories - a third story based on two, a fifth story based on four, a whole scale of sharps and flats that lies between the major keys of the most visible and ostensible stories. These storytelling spaces are not spaces that are facilitated with an eye toward a particular outcome attached to a particular tactical goal. The need is for spaces that will serve more strategic purposes of discovery, spaces where there is a breaking down of the dividers between, if you will, the Tamara rooms which, as Boje suggests, "goes into deep structure, well below the surface network patterns of dialoging people" (2005), with the stories helping to provide "full voice."

Practitioners do not pursue constructs that appear as rangy and radical as the

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Metamorphosis Model (even when it has been the focus of significant study and development by respected researchers) in part because there is pressure for them to predict the outcomes (and then achieve them), and to keep the curves on the metrics dashboards on trending smoothly, linearly, in the appropriate direction (e.g. down for defects, which despite the D-words is seen as a good thing, and up and to the right - consistent with the R-words, for nearly everything else). In part, they do not pursue rangy ideas because a major multinational has not yet made them manifest in their organizations, and publicized them with a stamp of approval. They have not yet, for example, created the kinds of spaces suggested here, so there is no easy business case to build, no solid language with which to convince senior management that the yield will outstrip the risk.

And so, finally, we arrive at it - the scary R-word, not on Bakhtin's list, but an R-word like no other. There is a Risk that in these open spaces - be they face-to-face, telephonic, videographic, and/or cyber - something unprecedented and unaligned with the carefully negotiated strategic and tactical plans will occur. The strategic planning process, for example, has mechanisms in place to handle aberration, stories of its own - scenarios - that delineate contingency plans all engineered to prevent the descending forces associated with stratification. But the scenario planning process actually aims to avoid the application of the tactical steps or plot points associated its scenarios. It focuses on reaction to threatening forces, and the evolution of new stories based on their emergence. It aims for stability. And if the heteroglossia of open story spaces were to create and liberate a true Renaissance? Well, there is no easy way to explain to shareholders a sudden shift outside of the regular planning cycle. The practitioner who created the space, who fostered the expression of that "multiplicity of experiences" (Boje, 2005), would be the same practitioner responsible for quelling

the enthusiasm of the storytellers and listeners, or of the stories themselves. That practitioner would become responsible for sculpting the ideas generated by the story/telling, shaving and curtailing them, so that they could more easily fit into the institutionalized, mechanistic models of planning production. Indeed, practitioners do not pursue these constructs first because they themselves are cast in a system which they are at once asked to both stabilize and change, and second because the system itself has not been interpreted (until, perhaps, now with the advent of the Metamorphosis Model) as capable of the elasticity and tensile strength that makes complex, multi-dimensional change at least possible at most desirable. If stories are a way of releasing surprising surges of energy out of context, it's no wonder that positive stories like "All Safe, Gentlemen, All Safe," stories that support the normal trajectory - up and to the right - are preferred.

*"I want to come and work for you" the mechanic said, his eyes meeting mine squarely. "I love this company, and I'm sorry about what happened, and I only want to work here." He paused, and I waited. "My idea is that no one should ever be like me. No one should get hurt this way. And I can help. I want to come and work in the training department. I can write training materials, and I could teach too, I think. But that's not the thing. The thing is, I want to tell my story."*

*"Your story?"*

*"That's right. I want to go to every technical class, every safety class, and I want to tell people what happened to me, what I did. I want to show them my scars. I want them to see how I can't stand up straight. I want to tell them about how my life is different now, from the very moment I get up in the morning to pee. I can do that if I come to work for you. That's*

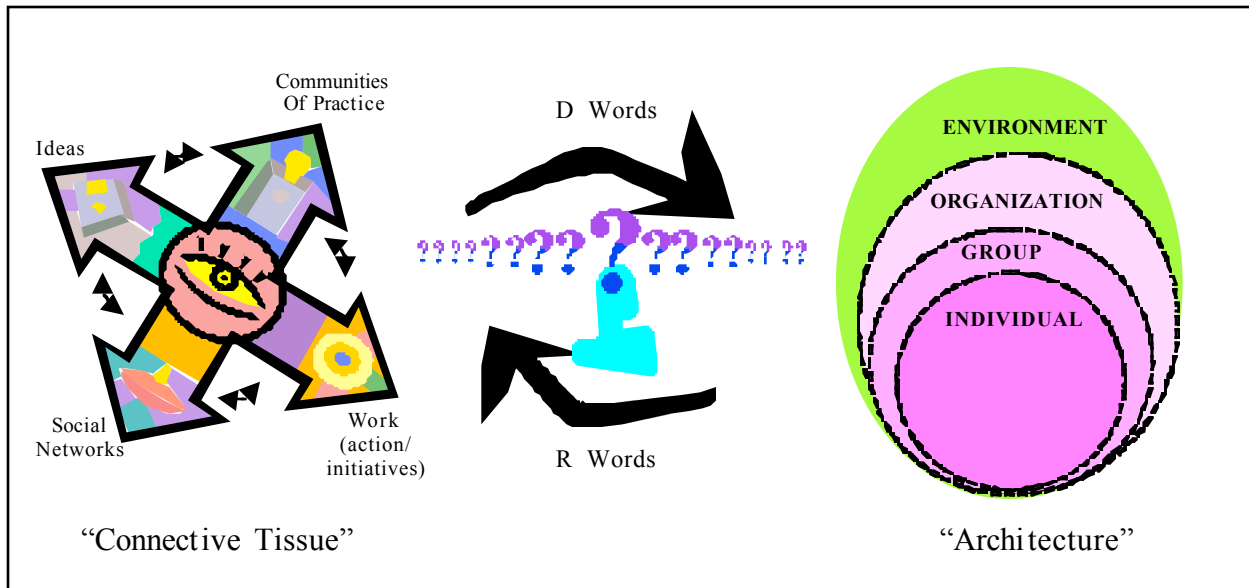
*my idea.”*

It is hard for me, at this point, to imagine any of my clients or former colleagues problematizing the Metamorphosis Model in ways that help to render it practical for the purpose of implementation. Still, I believe that the Model has very practical implications for the current trend of systematically applying story/telling in for-profit settings, and perhaps in other types of organizations as well. To that end, I propose a preliminary reflective process for practitioners interested in creating channels to increase the visibility of stories that vesselize descent and renewal in various configurations, stories that are owned and cared for by both primary and peripheral/marginalized members of the organization. Those practitioners who are endeavoring to systematically apply story/telling for strategic purposes, and who see the possibilities of story/telling in both of the two metamorphic, intertextual cycles used to describe the Metamorphosis Model, free themselves to hear all the “notes,” all the “instruments” of the organization. Moreover, they have the potential of crossing a threshold into a space where story/telling does more than leverage/explicate what is/has happened. They cross into (or create) a potentially dialogical space that can move the organization in an upward spiral of equals and opposites, of death and rebirth, that even the most positive of scholars could appreciate.

### **Using the Metamorphosis Model Language to Reflect on and Locate Liminal Shadow Stories**

Even without deep insight into the broader and deeper implications of the model, the language in the Metamorphosis Model (Boje, 2005) associated with the Descending and Renewing Forces, depicted for reference in Figure 1, can combine with the practitioner's shifting and evolving knowledge/understanding of the organization to form an excellent starting point for reflection.

Though the efficacy of a good formula appeals to many practitioners, I offer nothing that will replace deep listening/understanding of the organization by the practitioners or for their sound business judgment. Instead I offer an example of crafting a “way in” to productive reflection, and a sort of “model in progress” (truncated both by its newness and by space limitations) for the benefit of visual thinkers who might find it helpful (Figure 2). This model borrows, with apologies, from the design of the Twin Cycles of Metamorphosis (Boje, 2005, <http://scmoi.org/ODCtrack.htm>). It depicts the mechanistic aspects of the organization's design on the right and its more organic processes on the left, both affected by and affecting the practitioner's reflective questioning from the platform of descending and renewing language (in the central position in Figure 2).



**Figure 2 - Using Metamorphosis Language to Connect to Organizational Story Points**

When consulting with organizations, I begin by listening to their stories. I review the language associated with the Descending and Renewing Forces of the Metamorphosis Model (Boje, 2005), letting this language mingle with my understanding of the current state of the organization. The act of reading the D-words often gives rise to certain organizational images (or dimensions of the organization) that are “descending” or “dying” - winding down toward a “natural” completion or moving in a literal chaotic death spiral. There may be descending or dying elements at the highest levels in the organization, at the system/organization or group level - whole chunks of strategy that have outlived their usefulness. Or the descension or death may be occurring “down” a level, at the level of the individual - perhaps a senior leader who has “outlived his time” or an individual contributor who can no longer flex to make the changes necessary to keep her job. A shift in the external environment that has obsoleted some structural component of the organization has emerged: a business unit, for example, that is drawing on the life forces of the organization, causing its literal death. In another instance, a business unit was positioned in a way that made the

entire organization ripe for a buy-out in which it would be “devoured,” with even its brand name “digested” or “destroyed.” Sometimes I connect with an idea or a tradition, once valued, that is now withering, having reached the end of its perceived usefulness. Often there is another aspect of the organization’s “connective tissue,” such as a particular social network or community of practice, that is decaying.

Conversely, and equally, I often find that it is one or more R-words that connect with aspects of the current state of the organization. Considering rejuvenation, my attention in one case was immediately focused on a plant that had been completely “retooled,” “renovated” and “restored” to former levels of productivity with a new product line. In another instance, nostalgia in the marketplace had allowed for the “resurrection” of a formerly popular product line that had fallen out of favor.

The words of the model lead to images, and the images lead to “story points” - people, places and events/moments when story occurs in organizations with sufficient force to allow for its narration. Any one given story point may be connected with others in

a traceable, but non-linear pattern. It may be the beginning or the end of the story, or neither, or both. A single story point can be the beginning of one story and the end or a midpoint in another, simultaneously or serially. Adopting the Yin-Yang contention that the seeds of the opposite are contained within the other, I have developed a reflective practice of routinely flipping the coin to see its other side. Where there is renewal, there will be story-points of descension and visa versa. From these story points new pathways will extend which I can explore collaboratively with the client, choosing to go deep or broad or, time permitting, deeply broad.

*“Tell me more,” I said, “about how you would see this job working.” And he did. He wanted to tell a story that would make Elisha Graves Otis spin in his venerable grave. And it was a good idea.*

*I went to the seventh floor. “He’s been to see me,” I explained. “I think there’s a way to keep him from suing.” Sighs all around. The executives leaned in. “He wants to keep working for us... in the training department. I told him I thought it was a great idea, and I’d try to get it approved.” More sighs. “So?”*

*“Do it,” they said, nearly in unison. “Make it work.” And we did.*

*That mechanic went to every class he could manage. He pulled his story out of the shadows and put his own version “on the street” where it belonged. He videotaped his story so that he could be translated for “use” overseas. His story was not pretty. It was one of accident and permanent disability, sloppiness and ongoing pain. Each time he told it, everyone listened, eyes wide. And each time he told it, everyone’s hands moved to their own bellies. He made them promise to “lock out/tag out.” And they did.*

## Concluding Thoughts

For me, the implications of the Metamorphosis Model as organizational theory are still taking shape, and will be for sometime to come. What is clear to me, as both a practitioner and as a scholar, is that in organizations pursuing systematic storytelling relative to organizational goals, there is need for more fully representative story/telling. The pull of positive scholarship has combined with the communications ritual of whitewashing, spinning, and otherwise manipulating the messages from the primary spaces in the organization to mesh with the desired future state in the interest of advancing towards it. This manipulation is accomplished by lifting up certain iconic stories for increased visibility in combination with the de-selection of stories from liminal spaces where their edges and even their potential prevent them from fitting neatly into the mould of the espoused future/past/present story.

The Metamorphosis Model (Boje, 2005) gives us a context in which to consider the ebb and flow of both extreme stories and their more mundane siblings across the strata of both the organizational architecture and the organization's context/time. The hopefulness of social heteroglossia can be supported by new story/telling spaces that are open to all the listeners associated with the organization, ones that transcend our conventional ideas of space, time and sense making. Reflection based on the language of Descending and Renewing Forces will lead to story “points” - not always the beginning or the end, or a complete story, but a sort of episode in a story. From there, we can trace the various pathways of the story, up tributaries and down into backwaters, where the stories will deepen/broaden his/her understanding of the organization, its context and the people who comprise it. Reflecting deeply on the nature of the organizations and the loci of power therein is a way of experimenting with this model and taking steps to balance propagandized stories with stories that need to be

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told/heard as equals - stories Drawn from the organization's shadows and the Retrieved from its light.

As the practice of systematic or strategic storytelling is heating up in for-profit business, the philosophy embedded in positive scholarship, especially Appreciative Inquiry, builds a case for the use of positive stories. In practice, there is a tendency to translate this business case into permission to ignore or even suppress the negative stories which tend to reside in the liminal spaces of the organization, and are owned/told by the marginalized members who work there. The positive stories can play an important role in organizations, and there is sound research to support their use, but role of shadow story/telling appears to have been as marginalized in research as the stories themselves have been in organizations. The field of story/telling practice in organizations will benefit greatly from research into the application of the Metamorphosis Model, its variations as it develops further, and other models emerging in the same spirit. We need approaches that encourage practical ways of thinking about and working with the "difficult" stories that balance and challenge the dominant, sanctioned stories already being told by primary voices in primary spaces.

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