

Opening Up: Creative Storying at Work



Andrew Rixon

“Storytelling, particularly in the oral tradition of our ancestors, has been used for centuries to pass on history, tradition and wisdom to younger generations. Who doesn’t like a story, particularly a fairy story! Stories are safe and when shared, open us up to new experiences and ways of thinking. In this small but powerful book, Andrew has captured the simplicity of exploring the most complex issues through the safety of storytelling. It is maturity that will determine the level of our interpretation and acceptance of the stories.”

Sandra Nicholson, Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police

‘Andrew has cleverly shown how important storytelling can be in our everyday lives. How enlightening that we can all believe in fairy tales again!!’

Justine Minne L&D Relationship Manager Bendigo Bank

“Enlightened employers understand that only when people can be “whole” at work- with mind, body, spirit and heart connected- will engagement follow and passion flow. Stories provide the medium for that sort of connection, and this book makes a huge contribution to how stories can be woven into the day-to-day.”

Annalie Killian, Catalyst for Magic, AMP

“This is a really insightful read full of words, phrases and stories that we all need to have at our disposal when confronted with linear thinking.”

Frank Connolly, VPS Continuous Improvement Network Coordinator

Opening Up: Creative Storying at Work

Andrew Rixon

Illustrations by Simon Kneebone

Opening Up: Creative Storying at Work
Copyright © Andrew Rixon 2009

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Published by Babel Fish Group
PO Box 12448
A'Beckett Street PO
Melbourne, Victoria 3000
Australia
www.babelfishgroup.com

Printed by Impact Digital Print
Units 3-4 306 Albert Street
Brunswick
Victoria 3056
www.impactdigital.com.au

Design and layout by Liquid Creativity
www.liquidcreativity.com.au

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication
entry:

Author: Andrew Rixon

Title: Opening Up: Creative Storying at Work

Edition:

Publisher: (this is all to come)

ISBN:

Notes:

Subjects:

Dewey Number:

I don't believe people are
looking for the meaning of life
as much as they are looking for
the experience of being alive.

Joseph Campbell

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements | ii |
| Why this book? | iv |
| Esool Gnah | 1 |
| Have we forgotten what work really is? | 5 |
| Do we forget who we are at work? | 9 |
| Three signs that we've forgotten we work in a complex world | 13 |
| Being too outcomes-focused; Or, the problem of getting from A to B | 14 |
| Thinking there's one right answer and it's 42! | 18 |
| Trying to do too much | 20 |
| The problem of solving problems at work | 25 |
| Have we forgotten how to reflect? | 29 |
| Have we also forgotten how to listen? | 35 |
| Where do stories come from? | 43 |
| How do we 'story' events? | 45 |
| Remembering how we once learnt from fairy tales | 53 |
| You don't need to remember much to invite a fairy tale | 56 |
| A fairytale about what's not said at work | 58 |
| Opening up the fairytale of leadership at work | 63 |
| Coaching oneself through a fairytale | 71 |
| Seven things to remember once you've finished this book | 77 |
| The Red Crocs | 81 |
| Resources | 87 |
| About the Author | 91 |

Acknowledgements

This book began, unexpectedly, with Simon Kneebone (cartoonist and illustrator extraordinaire) and myself co-facilitating a session at the Australian Facilitators Network conference in 2006 in Geelong, titled 'Facilitator Fairy Tales'. As a result of this session, two fairy tales emerged that are the bookends for this book. Specific thanks to Greg Jenkins and his group's creative storying for both of these tales.

Since then, I have to thank my clients for enabling me to expand my knowledge and continue learning about the application of creative storying processes. These include corporations such as Australia Post, Bendigo Bank, Fujitsu and Retravisio; Government and scientific organisations such as CSIRO, DHS, DSE, and EPA; and University sector clients such as The University of Queensland, The Australian National University and Monash University.

Others I'd like to thank for providing mentoring, inspiration, and clarity are Bob Dick, Brian Bainbridge, Viv McWaters, Judy Gray, Catherine Lloyd, Russel Barnes, Shawn Callahan, Angela Lewis and my editor the 'book doctor', Margaret Johnson.

Finally I'd like to thank my parents for inspiring within me a deep passion and love of learning and my wife for her support, brilliance and patience with all the 'brain-picking' conversations we have had over the years.

I've found myself often surprised and fortunate to be working as a professional facilitator and change consultant. Having worked with over 1000 groups, I have had the opportunity to observe, watch and work with a diversity of people from a range of workplaces ranging across government, non-government, corporate and tertiary sectors. From these interactions I have repeatedly come to reflect on the question, 'Why do we make life so hard for ourselves?'

One answer that keeps returning is that we've forgotten that we live and work in a complex world. A world where work is not just about the task, it's about task and relationship. A world where we are more than our work selves. A world where, when we find ourselves stuck, we often focus on the 'stuckness', getting even more stuck.

I have personally found that stories – if we are able to reflect, listen and find their meanings – help us not to forget that we live and work in a complex world. By becoming aware of the processes that create stories we begin to open ourselves to new possibilities that lie within. Creative storytelling, through the

genre of fairy tale, has found its way into the workplace. Using specific case studies, this book explores the power of creative storytelling for change.

This book will begin to open up the possibilities, practicalities and presents that are waiting for us to discover them. We all have all the resources we require, but often don't realise it. Or we forget. Like Esool Gnah, the character in our first story, you have all the resources you need to get moving to do what's most important for you. Where will you start?



Once upon a time there lived a special shepherd by the name of Esool Gnah. Esool Gnah was a special shepherd because he wanted to develop leadership skills amongst his sheep. He was concerned that they were just followers, and that there were no leaders amongst his flock. So he tried to develop his facilitation skills and he really went out of his way to get his flock to learn. He was continually frustrated because, try as he might, he couldn't develop their leadership skills.

One day, totally frustrated, he visited the wise tree, and asked, 'Wise tree, what am I doing wrong? What is happening? Why are they such followers? Why can't I develop leaders?'

The wise tree answered, 'Esool Gnah, you have all the resources you require, you are doing a fine job, you have a great talent for developing sheep... move on to the next flock.'

Esool Gnah started to think that maybe it was just the sheep he was working with. 'I'll move on to another flock and it will be

¹ This fairytale has been adapted from a facilitator group fairy tale collected from the 2006 Australian Facilitator Network conference held in Geelong. For more see A. Rixon and S. Kneebone (2007): 'Facilitator fairy tales', <http://www.babelfishgroup.com/files/FacilitatorFairyTales.pdf>.

better there,' he thought. He began to work with the next flock. This time, there were two sheep fighting and he had to ask them to leave the flock. He found himself feeling the same frustration all over again, so he went back to the wise tree and asked, 'What can I do? What am I doing wrong?'

The tree answered, 'Esool Gnah, you have all the resources you require, you are doing a fine job, you have a great talent for developing sheep... move on to the next flock.'

On to the next flock. This was becoming a pattern in Esool Gnah's life. He would move on from flock to flock to flock. And he would encounter the same sorts of problems. 'Why do they have to be like sheep? Why can't they be leaders? Why can't they be what they can be and achieve their potential?' cursed Esool Gnah.

In reply, the sheep would bleat, 'We're doing the best we can, we're doing the best we can.'

'But your best is not good enough!' exclaimed the frustrated Esool Gnah, and he tramped back to the wise tree seeking help.

On return to the wise tree Esool Gnah heard again, 'Esool Gnah, you have all the resources you require, you are doing a fine job, you have a great talent for developing sheep... it's time for you to return to your first flock.'

'The first flock? That pack of losers!' exclaimed Esool Gnah. Grumbling and frustrated, he returned to his first flock, and there they were – his sheep. He needed a few moments to think so he went into the shepherd's bathroom and washed his face.

He had his shepherd facilitator's name tag on with his name, 'Esool Gnah', and when he looked in the mirror in a rare moment of relaxed concentration, he saw his name in reverse. There was his answer – it had been with him all along. 'Esool Gnah', in the mirror, read 'hang loose'. From that day he did hang loose, and he and his sheep lived happily ever after.





Have we forgotten what work really is?

I like work: it fascinates me.
I can sit and look at it for hours.

Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat*

In the early 1900s some important experiments were conducted which have since become known as the Hawthorne experiments. These experiments were conducted within highly mechanised, task-focused manufacturing environments. The stories emerging from these experiments were to become some of the first demonstrations of the importance and ubiquity of the social nature of work.

It's not rocket surgery to suggest that work consists of both task and relationship. If we ask why work so often gets boiled down to a 'task focus', the common answer we hear is 'because relationships are too hard'.

Maybe it's like the old man and the village:

Once, on the outskirts of a small village, there lived an old man. One day, a traveller coming from a far away land approached the old man and asked him, 'How are the people in your village?' The old man looked up at the traveller and asked, 'How do you find them in your village?' The traveller looked distraught and replied that his village was full of crime, hostility and violence and the people weren't trustworthy at all. The old man sadly nodded and answered, 'I think you'll find them the same here too.'

Some time later another traveller approached the old man on his way to the village and asked him, 'How are the people in your village?' The old man looked at the traveller and asked, 'How do you find the people in your village?' The traveller beamed and went on to tell the old man how friendly, empathetic and caring the people were in his village. The old man looked up and smiled and said to the traveller, 'Well, I think you'll find them the same here too.'

What we focus on becomes our reality. Think back through your experiences at work. When have you been at your best? When have you been able to navigate the complexity of managing both tasks and relationships? What skills and strategies have these experiences provided you with?





Do we forget who we are at work?

Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not.

Gestalt Paradoxical Theory of Change

With work so often focusing on task, it's not unusual to see it accompanied by a linear, sequential mindset. Before long we forget that we live in a rich, complex, organic and highly non-linear world, preferring the orderly, habitual and ritualised certainty of an environment and workplace that is organised around linearity and predictability.

It only takes a second to reflect on our own career path, however, and then we remember the twists and turns, ripples, flows and eddies which have been the reality of our life so far.

The gestalt paradoxical theory of change suggests that we don't change by being who we are not, but rather by becoming who

we really are. But in a workplace where task focus, linearity and certainty are the trend, diversities of self and the understanding of who one really is disappear into the turbulent seas of workloads, office politics and keeping special interests and imaginative, passionate projects secret.

How often have you been surprised to learn that a work colleague whom you thought you knew well has an out-of-work life you knew nothing of?

In his book *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, Alain De Botton comments on how many of us are still at jobs chosen for us by our sixteen-year-old selves. Reflecting on life so far, what roles have you played? Which selves have you seen active in your working life? What crossover do you see between your personal life, hobbies and working role? How well do you really know your colleagues?





Three signs that we've forgotten we work in a complex world

I like to say we've forgotten something, and that this thing we've forgotten is very important. Actually, I could say that I am the one who forgets this thing all the time; and maybe if I do, then others do as well. Given my ability to keep forgetting, I've found that there are some signs that can help me (and maybe others) to remember.

And what's the thing we've forgotten?

It's that we live in a complex world. A highly non-linear world. A world full of surprises and unpredictability. A world where we really don't know how things will turn out. Just take a look at the weather – especially here in Melbourne!

The three signs that we've forgotten that we live and work in a complex world are:

- Being too outcomes-focused
- Thinking there's one right answer and it's 42!²
- Trying to do too much

² From Douglas Adam's Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, where the universe's most intelligent computer, tasked with coming up with the answer to the meaning of life, provides this answer after centuries of computation

Being too outcomes-focused; Or, the problem of getting from A to B

Being a professional facilitator and change consultant I often struggle with bringing work home. Once, knowing that I was to be married in six months, I enrolled my fiancée and myself in a three-month 'team building through sailing' program. The idea was that at sea we'd learn a lot more about each other and our communication and leadership styles.

When we began, we were the worst sailors. On the first day of the program we capsized our small 12-foot pacer – on-shore! Over the three-month period however, we made some progress and even won some races. The event I'd like to share now is one which happened around the middle of the program.

It was a cold bleak morning, and we were all looking out anxiously at the bay and the winds that were blowing in as we rigged up our boats. Sailing out of the Sandringham Yacht Club requires you to sail through a fairly narrow channel bounded by million-dollar yachts on either side. Once through you then sail around the breaker wall into the open bay.

With our little sailboat in the open bay, pitching and tossing in the waves that were hitting us, we had the opportunity to look

into the belly of what was to be a significant storm. We decided that we'd be best off turning around and heading back for shore, given the darkness of the storm and the winds and waves that were starting to roll in. The instructor gave our decision the thumbs-up and cruised out in his speedboat to tell the others to do the same.

Now some interesting moments occurred. The first one was that, to get back to our launching position, we would have to make a special gybe (turn) to make the trip around the breaker wall. When I took the rudder and steered in the general direction of where we wanted to head, the lack of response from the boat told us about the strength of the winds that, now, were around 30 knots. We were being blown downwind at an incredible pace – and the beach was looming in front of us!

In a move of desperation, I grabbed the mainsheet and forced the boom across, completing the gybe. This could have caused a very successful capsize, but luckily for us it was one of the rare times where we stabilised, and made it around the breaker wall. Others weren't so lucky, being blown onto the rocks forming the breaker wall.

Our next challenge was to sail upwind through the narrow channel bounded by the million-dollar yachts. Those of you who

know anything about sailing upwind will know that you achieve this by 'tacking', a series of zig-zag movements. Each zig and zag saw our sail boat move precariously close to the million dollar yachts on each side. Finally we made it to shore.

Once everyone had returned and we had unrigged the boats, we began a debrief with the instructor. I shared with him the struggle that I faced about doing the gybe to make the turn around the breaker wall. I asked, 'What should I have done?'

He replied, 'Well, you could have just sailed on to the beach, waited the storm out, and then sailed to shore.'

I was dumbfounded. It was an option that was so simple that it had never occurred to me. You could call it a Homer Simpson 'D'oh' moment.

The moral of this story?

Sometimes when you are so focused on getting somewhere you might miss an obvious and helpful alternative.

Sometimes to get to where you need to go you need to sail in a different direction.

More than that, sometimes to get to where you need to go you need to sail at the thing you don't want to hit!



Thinking there's one right answer and it's 42!

There is a principle in complexity science which is called the Irreducible Principle. This principle says that you can't boil something down without it becoming something else. That is, in a complex system, the smallest description of a thing is the thing itself.

It's interesting how often in our fast-paced world we seek for nice, neatly-packaged '42' answers and solutions.

Why do we make life so hard for ourselves?

Sometimes it seems like we have to go on a journey of rediscovery to remember that in a world of complex problems, there is no one right answer and there are often many possible solutions.

While facilitating a two-day strategic review with a large charity organisation, I had the opportunity to be part of boardroom discussions between state-based CEOs, national and state managers and several board members. During the first hour and a half of the meeting one of the CEOs, clearly frustrated and annoyed, said to me, 'Andrew, this feels messy, where are we? I need to know where this is.' The answer which I provided was that it was messy, and the place that we were heading was

something we were all going to find out over the next two days. One of the board members commented how this CEO wanted to be at tomorrow today.

As we proceeded, it dawned on me what was causing this CEO anxiety. He believed that the answer for the organisation was an aggressive growth strategy. He had worked it all out before the meeting and had gotten to his '42'. The messiness and anxiety that he felt was that maybe, just maybe, his '42' wasn't so certain.

By the end of the workshop it became clear that there were many fundamental concerns to be addressed, and that the basic data and research to justify an aggressive growth strategy did not exist. What the group all agreed on was the need to consolidate.

In the closing comments of the workshop the CEO said that he was both depressed and relieved. He was depressed because he had really wanted to take an aggressive growth strategy, but he was relieved because what they had planned, talked and worked through made sense.



Trying to do too much

The last sign of forgetting that we live in a complex world is how often it is that we over-complicate our lives by creating Rube Goldberg devices. Rube Goldberg was an American cartoonist, sculptor, author, engineer and inventor, best known for a series of popular cartoons he created depicting devices that perform simple tasks in indirect, convoluted ways.

How often have you found yourself creating Rube Goldberg devices in your life or work? Why do we shun simplicity and prefer complication?

In the 1950s some researchers conducted what is known as the Bavelas experiment. They asked two groups of participants to work out a theory for what made for sick or healthy slides of biological cells, based on obtaining feedback from each of their guesses. The difference between the groups was that only the Group As obtained real direct feedback about their guesses. The Group Bs also received feedback – but they didn't know that it was Group As, not their own. It gave them no assistance in confirming the validity of their guesses.

Group As came up with a simple elegant theory for determining whether slides showed healthy or sick samples, with 80% accuracy. Group Bs came up with a highly convoluted and complicated theory, that provided far less accuracy than Group As theory.

When the researchers let the Group As interact with the Group Bs, something fascinating occurred. Almost all of the Group As felt that the Group Bs, because of the complexity and seeming sophistication of their discussions, had the better theory. As a

result, many of the Group As worked to incorporate the elements of Group B's theories into their model. As a result Group As performed significantly worse in the follow-up assessment.

The moral of these stories?

Remembering that we live in a complex world will mean that we can begin with the end in mind³, but in the meantime, we can focus on the journey and realise the significance of little steps in terms of both achieving and changing the end we had in mind. Sometimes we need to go not in the direction of B to get from A to B.

Remembering that we live in a complex world also means that we can be comfortable with paradoxes and realise that there are a multitude of answers, solutions and personalities out there. Not anyone is the same as us.

And, finally, remembering that we live in a complex world means that we are able to find, value and nurture simplicity within our own lives. As Einstein said, 'Everything needs to be as simple as possible but no simpler'.



³ Steven Covey (1989): The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People



The problem of solving problems at work

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them

Einstein

Narrative Therapy offers the concept of thick and thin narratives. For example, ask someone about a problem and you are likely to hear a thick, rich narrative about the problem. Then ask about any possible solutions and you might hear them struggle for something to say. The solution has a wispy, thin narrative around it.

Solutions Focus and Appreciative Inquiry both seek to thicken narratives around what's working, taking it as a given that the answer to questions like 'who and what are we like when we're at our best?' are thin-threaded narratives in many systems.

In the early 1990s, Jerry Sternin and his wife visited Vietnam with what to many seemed an impossible task. Their mission was to find a way of addressing the problem of sick, dying and malnourished children. The project funding they had was only for 6 months. How could they achieve profound social and behavioural change in this timeframe? It was hardly enough time even to study the problem, let alone work towards solutions.

Taking a radical approach, Sternin followed the theory of amplifying Positive Deviants.⁴ He made the assumption that in these resource-starved environments there must be women who not only were able to survive and nourish their children, but who were positively thriving. Positive Deviants are people who have found skills and strategies that work within their given environments.

When Sternin and his team found women who were thriving, they interviewed them to develop an understanding of the skills, strategies and techniques that these positive deviant women used. Spreading the wisdom and knowledge of these exceptional women across the communities of Vietnam had an enormous positive impact. The ground-breaking work that Sternin did in

Vietnam has since served as a model for rehabilitating tens of thousands of children in 20 countries.

Too often in organisations today we make the assumption that developing a rich understanding around a problem will help contribute to the development of a solution. The paradox is that, in a complex world, often there is no causal connection between understanding a problem and developing or implementing a solution.

Questions are an intervention. The questions you ask can provide the movement or the 'stuckness' to where you currently find yourself. Are you inadvertently thickening stories about the problem and becoming stuck, or are you opening up ways forward? How might you find how things are already working and do more of that?

⁴ J. Sternin and R. Choo (2000): 'The Power of Positive Deviance,' *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 14-15.



Have we forgotten how to reflect?

Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.

Peter F. Drucker

Why is it that in some workplaces the word 'reflection' is something that is met with cynicism? In such workplaces, suitable work-arounds have to be found to make the concept more palatable – like replacing 'reflection' with more acceptable alternatives such as 'review', 'planning', 'thinking' or 'criticism'.

It's ironic that we are so busy today that we find it difficult to justify – or even to find – a moment for reflection. When we do 'reflect', why is it that we often find ourselves beating up on ourselves, or even better, itemising all the things others haven't done? It seems much more satisfying to find problems outside ourselves.

Warrior



Characteristics of the shadow

- Rebellion
- Authority issues
- Patterns of invisibility:
"riding on the coattails of others"

Findings from the survey

- Authority issues: when change role from facilitator to participant and back
- Authority issues: when a group goes off track
- Authority issues in co-facilitating with other facilitators
- Becoming a blind defender of a company

Healer



Characteristics of the shadow

The four addictions:

- 1 Addiction to intensity
- 2 Addiction to perfection
- 3 Addiction to need to know
- 4 Addiction to being fixated on what's not working

Findings from the survey

- Addiction to perfection and focussing on what's not working
- Fixating on negative feedback
- Wanting a perfect process
- Pushing for too much meaning
- Under pressure – feeling like people are being deceitful

Visionary



Characteristics of the shadow

- Self denial
- Self abandonment
- Projection: "a disowned part of ourselves on the way home"

Findings from the survey

- Projection of
 - fear of anger in others
 - optimism about the process
 - sorrow of lack of achievement
- Feeling a loss of personal energy

Teacher



Characteristics of the shadow

- Positionality
- Judgement
- Control

Findings from the survey

- Knowing what's best for a group – wanting to 'tell' the group what it needs or where it needs to go
- Getting annoyed at participants not 'getting it'
- Not being challenging enough to participants

Following the wisdom of the quote 'If I own my own imperfections I don't have to look for them in anyone else', Simon Kneebone and I adapted Angeles Arrien's four archetypes⁵ to provide a model for group facilitators to reflect on their practice. In this model we invited facilitators to consider the shadows of the Warrior, Healer, Teacher and Visionary, and share about when they had found any of these present in their interactions with groups.

What we found, from an online survey involving over 400 facilitators world-wide, was that the archetypes provided a rich way of reflecting on the experiences of working as group facilitators. Grouping the qualitative responses into their key themes provided specifics on the shadows for each of the archetypes.

Think about your own interactions with family, friends and colleagues at work. Take a moment to reflect on the shadows of Warrior, Healer, Teacher and Visionary. What can you learn

⁵ In her book "The four-fold way" Angeles Arrien, a cultural anthropologist presents her findings of surveying the world's culture and myth to identify four common archetypes. The Warrior, Healer, Teacher and Visionary. This facilitator model for reflection looks to the shadows as a way of seeing what other learnings are hidden within the layers of interactions we may find ourselves playing out within a group.

from the experiences of the shadows shared from this world-wide facilitator survey? Can you relate to some of the broad themes identified within the shadow areas? How are you when it comes to receiving feedback? Do you sometimes struggle with wanting to tell someone what you think they need?

Remembering the quote of 'If I own my own imperfections I don't have to look for them in anyone else': how might this idea help you find a way to open up to the learnings that live within these shadows? How might you start being easier on yourself and others?





Have we also forgotten how to listen?

A wise old owl sat on an oak;
The more he saw the less he spoke;
The less he spoke the more he heard;
Why aren't we like that wise old bird?

Traditional English

The difference between what's said, what's heard and what's meant never became so clear to me as when my wife and I were planning our wedding. As my family lived in rural Australia, we decided we would make a special trip one Christmas to be with them and to involve them in the planning.

Sitting around the kitchen table one evening I casually asked, once we'd broached the topic of our wedding, 'Would you like to invite a couple of people along?' I can't remember what the response was, which probably showed the level of listening I was doing, but I can remember the outcome. My parents didn't invite a single family member or friend to our wedding.

After the wedding it all came out. They were upset, angry, peeved (and you can fill in a few other adjectives here), with me because I told them they could only invite two people to the wedding. Just two people!

The difference between what's said, heard and meant is one thing, but having the skills to listen deeply to people's stories and experiences is another. The Australian Aboriginals not only have a wealth of stories but they also have a sophisticated process of developing understanding around the layers of meaning that are held within their stories.

As described in 'Treading Lightly: The hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people' by Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe, there are four levels of meaning to a cultural story and these layers of meaning are opened up through what they call the traditional education. They provide the story of the Crane and the Crow as an example:

Garraagaa, the crane, was a great fisherman. He could catch many fish by hunting them out, with his feet, from underneath the logs in the creek. One day, when he had a great many fish on the bank of the creek, Waan, the crow, who was white at that time, came up and asked the crane to give him some fish.

The crane told the crow to wait until the fish were cooked but the crow was hungry and impatient. He kept bothering the crane, who told him to wait. Eventually the crane turned his back. The crow sneaked up, and was just about to steal a fish when the crane saw him, seized a fish and hit the crow right across the eyes with it. The crow was blinded for a few minutes. He fell on the burned black grass around the fire and rolled over and over in his pain. When he got up, his eyes were white and the rest of him black, as crows have been ever since.

The crow was determined to have his revenge. He waited for his chance and one day saw the crane fast asleep on his back with his mouth wide open. He crept quietly up to him and stuck a fish bone right across the root of the crane's tongue.

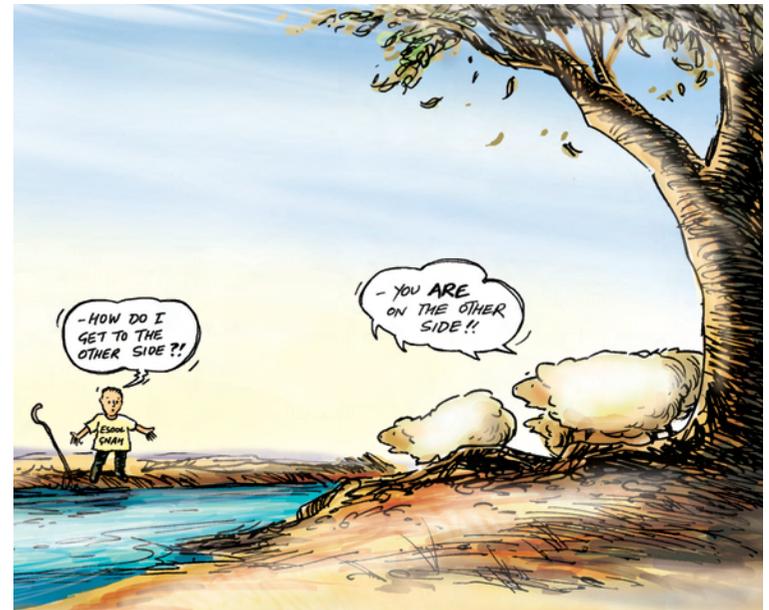
The crane woke up and when he opened his mouth to yawn, he felt like he was choking. He tried to get the bone out of his throat and, in the effort, he made a strange scraping noise – 'gah-rah-gah, gah-rah-gah'. But the fish bone could not be moved, and still the only noise a crane can make is 'gah-rah-gah' – the name by which he is known.

The first level of meaning within the story is about the text itself. It refers to simple questions around the story like, why does the crow have black feathers? Why does a crane make that strange scraping sound?

The second level of meaning concerns the relationships between the people and their community. This second level provides meaning that does not come directly from the story and is never explicitly stated. One example of this is the value *Do not impose your views on others*. The crane wants to impose his way of living on the crow by asking the crow to wait for the fish to be cooked. The crane attempts to use his power of superior knowledge to influence the crow's behaviour instead of letting the crow simply eat the fish raw.

The third level of meaning within the story concerns the relationship between the community and the larger environment and other communities. An example shared of this is the value *Do not stay in one place*. Sveiby and Skuthorpe note on page 48 that 'the crane exploits the fish in the river by fishing more than he needs to. If he continues in this way the crane will deplete the stock of fish. This explains why people have to move camp. If you move camp according to the seasons the resources will be at their prime at each place and you will find food with less effort.'

Finally, the fourth level of meaning relates to spiritual action and psychic skills. The authors explain how this level is a special level requiring participation in the practices, ceremonies and experiences of the community, which give access to this special knowledge.



Take the time now to go back and re-read the story of Esool Gnah. This story was originally created by five highly experienced group facilitators. I have often reflected on this story and found many layers of meaning within it. I invite you to consider the following four levels and use these to reflect on the differing levels of meaning with the story.

Level 1

About the story itself. What were the causes of Esool Gnah's frustrations? How was Esool Gnah able to overcome his frustrations?

Level 2

About the relationships between people and their community. What values are embedded within the story that relate to how people interact with each other? What assumptions are we invited to consider about 'where people are at' when it comes to working with difficult people? What do we learn about leadership?

Level 3

About the relationships between the community and the environment and other communities. As Esool Gnah moved from one flock to the next, how was he re-creating the same problem within different communities? What commonalities was he finding across these different communities?

Level 4

About deep personal meaning. What does this story reveal to you about how you engage and interact with the world? What learnings and lessons does the story provide for you in the form of a reflection of your own struggles and triumphs?



Where do stories come from?

In our daily lives, we operate as though under a spell, content to know that language is there, but not able to see it plainly or penetrate its mystery.... The language spell keeps most of the extraordinary nature of human language tidily in the background as we concentrate on the messages it conveys.

Christopher Hall⁶

Stories are all around us. Like a fish in water, we are often so close to the stories we tell that we may be unaware of the storying processes behind these stories.

Ursula Le Guin, a great science fiction and fantasy author, asks in her preface to *Tales from Earthsea*: how do you tell the history of something that has not happened? She answers that it's much like any other history. You tell the story and see what happened.

⁶ Hall, C. J., (2005): *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics: Breaking the Language Spell*, Continuum International

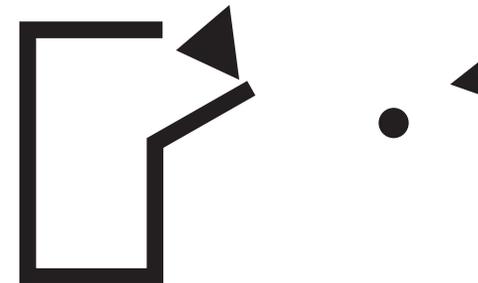
Alfred Adler, a co-founder of the psychoanalytic movement, developed a technique where he would ask patients what their first memories were and reflect on the 'story' shared for insights into the patient's 'storying'.

My own first memory story is of myself at around 18 months old lying in a cot and deciding that it's time to go exploring. I shimmy out of the cot, over the side and down to the floor. I crawl out and at some point I look into my parents' room. As I have told and re-told this story I've noticed different layers of meaning surfacing for me. Sometimes it's about 'getting out of the box'; sometimes it's about which parent looked up and said something (which I couldn't understand anyway); sometimes it's about how the memory fades into the vast linoleum floor, leaving me with the lingering thought of how life is a great adventure.

What's a story that you have found yourself repeatedly sharing? What differing layers of meaning have you noticed emerging from this story? How might you start to become more aware of the 'storying' processes that are going on in your own interactions, both personally and professionally? How have others stories influenced yours?

How do we 'story' events?

In 1944 Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel conducted a fascinating experiment exploring how we perceive, animate and 'story' events.⁷ In this experiment they created a small motion picture film where three geometrical figures (a large triangle, a small triangle and a circle) were shown moving in various directions and at various speeds. The only other figure in the field was a rectangle with a section that could be opened and closed like a door.



⁷ Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel (1944): 'An experimental study of apparent behaviour', *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol 57, No. 2 (Apr), 243-259.

The following list⁸ of events provides the main features of the picture-film, the key scenes described in the Heider and Simmel article being:

- 1 The large triangle moves toward the house, opens the door, and moves into the house and closes the door
- 2 The small triangle and circle appear and move around near the door
- 3 The large triangle moves out of the house towards the little triangle
- 4 The large triangle and the little triangle 'fight' with the large triangle winning. During the fight the small circle moves into the house
- 5 The large triangle moves into the house and shuts the door
- 6 The large triangle chases the small circle within the house: The little triangle moves along the outside of the house toward the door
- 7 The little triangle opens the door and the little circle moves out of the house and they close the door
- 8 The large triangle seems to try to get out of the house but does not succeed in opening the door: The small triangle and small circle move in circles around the outside of the house and touch each other several times
- 9 The large triangle opens the door and comes out of the house
- 10 The large triangle chases the small triangle and small circle twice around the house
- 11 The small circle and small triangle both leave the field
- 12 The large triangle hits the walls of the house several times: the walls break

The participants in this research study, three groups of undergraduate women, were asked to tell the story of what they saw in this short film.

⁸ Notice how even this simple list of events has storying embedded with the terms like 'house' instead of 'rectangle' and 'chases' instead of 'moves towards'.

One such storied response was:

A man has planned to meet a girl and the girl comes along with another man. The first man tells the second to go; the second tells the first, and he shakes his head. Then the two men have a fight, and the girl starts to go into the room to get out of the way and hesitates and finally goes in. She apparently does not want to be with the first man. The first man follows her into the room after having left the second in a rather weakened condition leaning on the wall outside the room. The girl gets worried and races from one corner to the other in the far part of the room. Man number one, after being rather silent for a while, makes several approaches at her; but she gets to the corner across from the door, just as man number two is trying to open it. He evidently got banged around and is still weak from his efforts to open the door. The girl gets out of the room in a sudden dash just as man number two gets the door open. The two chase around the outside of the room together, followed by man number one. But they finally elude him and get away. The first man goes back and tries to open the door, but he is so blinded by rage and frustration that he cannot open it. So he butts it open

and in a really mad dash around the room he breaks first one wall and then another.

The experiment finds that the most common interpretation is that the large triangle and the small triangle are fighting over the female, which is the small circle. When asked what kind of person is the big triangle, 97% of the participants described the large triangle as aggressive, warlike, belligerent, pugnacious, quarrelsome, troublesome, mean, angry, bad-tempered, temperamental, irritable, quick to take offense, a bully, villain, taking advantage of his size, picking on smaller people, dominating, power-loving, possessive.

Often before we even know it, we start interpreting and 'storying' events that happen around us. The way that we story these events depends significantly on what's going on internally and externally for us. It is interesting how the story of what was seen in this experiment sounds very much like a 1940s drama with the central protagonist being the girl and the story revolving around (no pun intended) a love triangle.

Consider an experience that had a particularly strong emotional impact for you. Tell the story of what happened. If you had to pick a genre for this story, which would you choose? A detective story, a mystery, a romance, a comedy? Like the list of movements provided in the Heider and Simmel film, can you create a list of events from this experience without imbuing them with interpretation, meaning and emotion? Looking over this list of events, what processes of 'storying' do you notice taking shape around them?





Remembering how we once learnt from fairy tales

Some day you will be old enough
to start reading fairy tales again.

C.S. Lewis

The fairy tale is a specific form and style of story. You might remember how, as a child, you learnt a lot about the world through fairy tales. Fairy tales made it safe to learn about the dangers of the world.

As adults we carry a wealth of understanding and intuition about the fairy tale genre. Because of this, inviting groups to create fairy tales results in some surprisingly simple and powerful stories.

Some of the essential qualities of the fairy tale are:

- 1 the depiction of magical or marvellous events as a valid part of human experience;
- 2 the incorporation of fantasy as arguably the most salient formal or stylistic feature of this genre;
- 3 the confrontation and resolution of a problem, frequently by embarking on a quest;
- 4 a happy ending, which is so fundamental to the genre that it may be regarded as a third defining feature; and
- 5 strong identification of the reader or listener with the central protagonist, who is presented in an unambiguous way.⁹

There has been considerable exploration of the fairy tale through literary, psychological and psychoanalytic lenses,¹⁰ and so the use of fairy tale is not entirely new to organisational and management literature. Indeed, the phenomenal success of the

popular book *The One Minute Manager*¹¹ has been attributed to the fairy tale structure within the text¹².

The fairy tale has been used as a sense-making tool both by researchers and by individuals working within organisations. Klenke (2002) uses the Cinderella story as a springboard to link and make sense of women's leadership stories and histories. Smith and Simmons discovered a cultural link between the dream of a staff member and the story of Rumpelstiltskin which gave the researchers and staff the ability to access and articulate something within the organisational culture which might otherwise have remained covert and inaccessible. Moxnes (2006) discusses how in a management education program he invites students to choose fairy tale characters for each other and use these to learn and reflect on teamwork and leadership.

⁹ S. S. Jones (2002): *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, Routledge.

¹⁰ Bettelheim 1976; Luthi 1976; Tatar 1990; Jones 2002

¹¹ by K. Blanchard and S. Johnson (1983): *The One Minute Manager*, Berkley.

¹² See N. Monin and J. Monin (2005): 'Hijacking the fairy tale: Genre blurring and allegorical breaching in management literature', *Organization* 12(4), 511-528.

You don't need to remember much to invite a fairy tale

Remember your humanity
and forget the rest

Albert Einstein

Where the examples shared so far appeal to the use of more popular culture fairy tales, this book differs significantly in that it follows on from that of Dick and Dalmau (1994), where groups are invited to create unique fairy tales incorporating all the elements of story and character that they feel relevant. Using fairy tale in this way provides rich opportunities for managers and team members not only to explore hidden and assumed meaning, but also provides a safe and often humorous space for exploring potentially conflict-ridden issues. Indeed, working with fairy tale appears to align strongly with the Appreciative Inquiry assumption of 'an organisation being a mystery to be embraced' rather than 'a problem to be solved' Hammond (1998) p 24.

Working with fairy tale is deceptively simple, and maybe it is this simplicity that makes it so powerful. If you ask, 'How does a fairy tale begin?' you won't be surprised to hear a group reply, 'Once upon a time...'. Similarly, when you ask 'And how does a fairy tale end?' the reply comes back, 'And they all lived happily ever after'. Asking a group, 'What characters might you find within a fairy tale?' will yield a bundle of suggestions around good guys and bad guys, princes, kings, queens, witches, wizards, dragons... the list goes on!

The beauty of working with the genre is how simple it is to invite others to explore and portray their experiences, either imagined or real, within the form of the fairy story. The framing may be as simple as 'Tell the history of working in this group, team or organisation'. Then get out of the way and let the group get to work. Don't be surprised or startled if you hear laughter.

It may be that the most important thing for you to remember is not to mention the words 'fairy tale'. If you do, be careful how you do so. Language can be a powerful trigger. You might find that an introduction around 'creative storying' or a 'creative history trip' is met with less resistance and cynicism. Be sure to take care with how you introduce creative processes like these with a group.

A fairytale about what's not said at work

All stories are true but some have happened

The following fairy tale is actual text from a group fairy tale shared within a consulting project where, with many people saying 'it's about what's not said', we were seeking new insights into the cultural aspects of flexible working options within a large Australian corporation.

Once upon a time in a land far, far away there was a kingdom. And in that kingdom there was a King and Queen (of course). And one day they had two little princesses. They were identical twins and the ironic thing about this is that they were both born at exactly the same time (it was a wide birth canal). And so there was a big dilemma: when the King and Queen were going to die, who was going to take over as Queen? So it was decided that they would both rule together.

Now the thing was that there was a magician in the Kingdom as well – he put a spell on the princesses. One of them was very nice – she was British (of course). The other one was evil. Things went along nicely all along. Whenever the bad princess was doing something, the good princess was always there to counteract it. So everything went along nicely for years and years.

Now the magician was a little bit upset about this so he arranged that when the King and Queen went out one day they would get 'tomatoed' by a big rock falling off a cliff. And they did! And that meant that the two princesses would get to be queens of this Kingdom.

Now after all this, of course, along comes the good prince. He sees the two princesses and he falls in love. But he only falls in love with the good princess. But of course they are identical. He thinks he knows which is which. Of course he marries the one he thinks is the good one. He is a prince and thinks he can spot the goodness in her. And then the next day, after the wedding, he wakes up and there at the foot of the bed is the magician and he's been turned to stone. The prince turns around and looks at his wife and wonders if he's married the good princess or the bad princess. And that's a fairytale.

After the group had presented their fairy tale to the other members of the group, I asked the listeners in the other groups what they had heard in it and how it related to the organisation. Surprisingly, they went on to say how the evil princess was one division of the organisation, and the good princess was another. Then what came out was a very powerful story illustrating the factions that were currently at play at senior levels within the

organisation. Amazed, and somewhat curious as to this groups' interpretation of the fairy tale, I turned back to the group who had originally created the tale and asked them to say what it was 'actually' about. Their response was that their fairy tale was 'actually' about two ladies job-sharing. The fairy tale depicted how one lady's strengths were matching the other's weaknesses. The magician being turned to stone, and the prince's dilemma of not knowing which princess he had married (the good or the evil one), illustrated their uncertainty as to how this new job-share arrangement would work out.

In the same way that fairy tales made it safe for children to learn about the adult world around them, they help to make undiscussables, difficult dynamics and emotions safe and discussable within a workplace. With the many differing layers of meaning available within a story, working in this way helps to provide multiple perspectives around a theme or inquiry. Can you think of some metaphors that would be helpful in opening up some constructive conversations within your workplace? Are there any topics or themes where it would be helpful for you to open up the diversity of views and multiple perspectives that sit around it? How might you use metaphor or fairytale to open up these conversations?





Opening up the fairytale of leadership at work

What follows below is an edited transcript from an interview with the manager of organisational development in an organisation that was preparing to hit the road with a new leadership development program. Through the use of a simple yet creative 'storying' process the interview tells of the value of the process for the manager, the OD team and the program.

We'd conceptually designed our executive development program as a twelve-month program but we hadn't designed every piece in the program and we still haven't. We're six months into it and we're still designing and building. What we had completed was a big application and selection process.

We launched a very significant communications process. Applicants had to put in an assessment against the leadership model and senior executives had to assess applicants against the model. We ran OPQ psychometric testing and then we took all that data and had a three-hour facilitated discussion with our senior executives so that we could select 20 participants from the 40 applicants.

So when we met with you we were at a point where we were still exploring options for the program. For us it was a bit of a taster opportunity for what this thing, fairy tales, was all about. At that point in time we were really nutting out the first three days, the introduction for the twelve-month program.

When you spoke about this concept of fairy tale, for me it was quite a struggle. I don't have children. I have puppy dogs. And, of course, I don't read them bedtime stories. And so, you know, it was a little bit distant for me. Obviously you have your own experiences and your favourite fairy tales from your childhood but it was just a bit hard to sit in a meeting room and connect to those childhood memories in that moment.

And I remember when we decided to spend 30 minutes writing a fairy tale I was like 'Oh, boy... how hard is this going to be!'

But the simplicity of what you explained...About 'once upon a time', there's the good guys and the bad guys and there's a happy ending – so there's a simple model to it. The beauty of that approach was trying to work out 'what are the bad issues coming through?' as well as 'what is the good stuff?'

It was a bit of a struggle. Sitting in a meeting room. There's not a great deal of stimulation. I don't have children. I have nieces and nephews. I'm not all that connected to fairy tale. But what I did, I had been skiing a week or two weeks beforehand at Mt Buller. And when I say no children, a little five-year-old daughter of close friends of ours, she's skiing around Mt Buller on all the runs, but she goes to ski school there and they have this little magic forest. They call it the enchanted forest. The ski classes are bunyips or cockatoos or kangaroos. So that was where I went, 'Oh, it will be something to do with that'. I had this visual. I had to hook in and get an actual visual of what this thing might be and what the characters would be, before I started writing.

The Enchanted Forest

Once upon a time there was an enchanted forest in the mountains. In the forest there were a lot of different animals who were going about their business quite happily. They didn't really know each other very well. Occasionally they bumped into each other and carefully got out of each other's way so that they could get on with their business.

There were possums, kangaroos, wombats, koalas, black cockatoos and owls. One evening the wise old owl was sitting in a large tree looking down on all the animals as they were settling down for the night. She said to the koala who was snuggling up with her young one, 'Wouldn't it be great to bring everyone together to do some learning together so that we can become a stronger community with which to face the world?'

'Wonderful idea,' said the koala. 'Let's plan it out.'

So they planned a number of activities to bring the group of animals together. The next day the owl and the koala talked to the animals and birds to see if they liked their idea. The possums and the kangaroos thought it was a great idea and were keen to get together with everyone.

They wanted both daytime and nighttime activities.

The wombat came out of his big hole in the ground and grunted a bit and dug a bit more dirt out – spraying dirt all over the owl and the koala. The black cockatoo stretched out his big black wings and red crest and then flew away screeching loudly, 'Why do I need to interact with all those animals and birds? I'm very happy as I am.'

The owl and the koala started designing activities with the possums and kangaroos. The wombat eventually came out of his burrow and helped with the planning.

The following day the black cockatoo flew overhead and saw all the animals talking and planning. He screeched and screeched to get their attention but they were focussed on what they were doing. Finally he gently floated down to listen, sitting on a low branch. He then started to join in.

The activities were planned and the journey began.

The manager's story continues...

The black cockatoo represented one particular individual, one of the 20 participants in the program. He'd been selected and I knew he had a background in the OD space and action research, and I'd built a lot into the program around action research and I knew he'd studied a lot about leadership and change. He was the one I thought would not play.

But I'd never spoken to anyone else in the team about that.

Because this came through so strongly in the story it enabled us to talk about it and call him the black cockatoo.

I didn't think about the story much for the next day or so. Then I started to think about it more and more. I started to realise that what I had written down was a real concern that had come out in the story, that I hadn't previously articulated to anyone in the project team.

What was interesting is – it actually played out on the first day of the retreat.



Tim was facilitating and talking about one of the leadership models, I think it was the Jim Collins model. Now these people are real technical experts and we are trying to develop their leadership skills and the 'black cockatoo' did the screech thing and said 'Oh, I studied that book when I was doing my masters and it's a load of bollocks.' So he actually did exactly what I'd written in the fairy tale. And nobody listened. Tim changed tack and he didn't do it again in the three days.

My concerns were right, and maybe the fact that we'd been able to have that conversation had subtly, subconsciously, helped us to be prepared.

I actually had a coffee with him yesterday, and I said, 'So how's the program going?' and he said, 'Oh, it's really good.' And he really likes the emerging style, the approach we are taking. And so it's working out really well.

But getting back to the process though. It was hard doing it in the moment. And probably the real value came in the next day or so when I reflected on what I had written as I was walking home. I just thought 'What was that about?' And we started to talk about it. It really helped us shape our thinking.

I think it was really putting the anxieties that we felt around the three days into words, in a safe way, by using that metaphor. In a way that we could then talk about what that meant. I think there is that safety around it because it goes to your deep feelings about things. For us the three days away was so important to kick the program off really well and it has been one of the great successes of the program so far.

The moral of this story?

Sometimes we have real concerns that take time to surface for us and for us to become aware of them. The power of working with metaphor is that it can make it safe for these concerns to emerge in a way that is not confrontational and is supportive within a group's or teams' conversational environment. The fairy tale provides a new language a team can use to discuss difficult issues. With deep reflective processes like working with the fairy tale taking time, don't be surprised if you find layers of meaning opening up for you days, weeks or even months afterwards.

Coaching oneself through a fairytale

The last example I'd like to share is one of my own fairytales, which I found helped me to find a new perspective on an experience that was troubling me.

The experience is what I've called 'My parents' non-visit to Melbourne'. What the story entails is how my parents, unknown to my wife and me, decided that they would prepare a lovely surprise visit to us in Melbourne. It was a Saturday afternoon when my wife and I arrived home to our unit to discover some presents on our doorstep. My wife immediately went into hyper-drive cleaning mode, figuring that my parents must be in town, and it was time to do a clean-up to make the place look presentable.

On ringing my parents, I learnt that they were at the airport, at the departure gate, waiting for their return flight to Brisbane. This non-visit meant that they had got up at 1am Saturday morning, driven for six hours from Moree to Brisbane, caught the first plane to Melbourne, and caught a \$100 cab ride out to where we lived; then, finding us not home, they left some presents and returned for the flight back to Brisbane and the drive back to Moree, to get home at around 2am on Sunday morning.

Marvelling at this experience, my wife couldn't help wonder what was going through my parents' minds. Creating the fairytale helped to provide a different story for her (and for me!).

Once upon a time, deep in a forest lived two bears. These two bears had a son, a special son, a human son; and before long this special son found himself leaving the forest and moving to a city far, far away.

As time progressed the two bears continued to live deep in the forest, doing their usual day-to-day activities but becoming more and more intrigued about their son's life in the city. One day they decided it was time to make the trip to visit their son, but they had a dilemma. How could bears, as bears, travel within the city full of humans? They would be ridiculed, and their travel surely wouldn't be a pleasurable one.

The days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months and the bears found themselves wanting more and more to make the journey. One night, before the bears went to sleep, Papa Bear made a wish that just for one day they could be transformed into humans so that they could make the long journey to the city to visit their son. Before long Papa Bear fell asleep, and at twilight he and Mama Bear awoke

with a shock. Looking at each other they discovered that they were human! Clearly the Great Bear God had granted Papa Bear his wish, that for just one day they would be transformed into humans and be able to make the journey to visit their son. Without wasting a moment, they grabbed some travel possessions and a special gift for their son and set forth.

It was a long and perilous journey. Through the forest. Out over the clearing. Up over the hills and towards the city that they could just see starting to emerge on the horizon. Long and perilous a journey as it was, Mama and Papa Bear were mindful of the need to be able to make it back into the forest before dusk as then they would be transformed into bears.

Finally they made it into the city, and worked their way to where their son lived. Special present in hand, the two bears made their way up to the front of their son's house and knocked on the door. They knocked. They waited. No-one was home. After all, this was a surprise visit, blessed by the gods; their son was not to know of their coming. As it turned out their son was looking for a new home with his gorgeous wife some neighbourhoods away.

Looking at the position of the sun, and knowing the fate of being discovered as bears in a city of humans, the two bears placed the special present at their son's front door and quickly made their way back to the forest. As the sun set, the bears transformed from their human form back into their true bear nature.

As they made their way towards their home, the bears thought about their visit to the city where their son lived. They thought about all the smells of the city. The smells around the home of where their son lived. They wondered what it must be like for their son to live in the city. Finally, they imagined their son arriving home to find a special present at his front door.

Thinking about all these things the bears felt a warm glow inside. A happiness. A contentment at having made such a long and perilous journey. A contentment with having seen where their son lived. A contentment with leaving the special present for their son. With this, the two bears arrived home, had some supper and lay down to sleep and awake to greet the new day and live happily ever after.

What's an experience that you've had that you are seeking a new perspective on? Are you willing to let go, open up, and see how re-storying this experience using the fairy tale genre might be helpful?

Let me help... Remember how a fairy tale begins? Who might be some characters within this tale?

Once upon a time...





Seven things to remember once you've finished this book

1 We live in a complex world

Be on the lookout for when you might notice the signs of when you are:

- Being too outcomes focussed
- Thinking there's one right answer and it's 42!
- Trying to do too much

2 Questions are an intervention

The questions you ask can provide the movement or the 'stuckness' to where you currently find yourself. Are you inadvertently thickening stories about the problem and being stuck, or are you opening up ways forward? How might you find how things are already working and do more of that?

3 Be easier on yourself

Remember: 'If I own my own imperfections I don't have to look for them in anyone else'; how might you find a way to open up to the learnings and gold that live within these shadows? How might you start being easier on yourself and others?

Don't forget what Warren Buffett said: 'If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging'.

4 Your 'Selves'

Reflecting on life so far, what roles have you played? Which selves have you seen active in your working life? What crossover do you see between your personal life, hobbies and working role? How well do you really know your colleagues?

5 Relationships not just Task

Think back through your experiences at work. When have you been at your best? When have you been able to navigate the complexity of managing both tasks and relationships? What skills and strategies have these experiences provided you with?

6 Listen and hear how stories come from storying

What's a story that you have found yourself repeatedly sharing? What differing layers of meaning have you noticed emerging out of this story? How might you start to become more aware of the 'storying' processes that are going on in your own interactions, both personally and professionally? How have others stories influenced yours?

Consider an experience that had a particularly strong emotional impact for you. Tell the story of what happened. If you had to pick a genre for this story, which would you choose? A detective story, a mystery, a romance, a comedy, a fairytale? Can you create a list of events from this experience without imbuing these events with interpretation, meaning and emotion? Looking over this list of events, what processes of 'storying' do you notice taking shape around them?

7 There are multiple perspectives

With the many differing layers of meaning available within a story, working in this way also helps to provide multiple perspectives around a theme or inquiry. Can you think of some metaphors that would be helpful in opening up some constructive conversations within your workplace? Are there any topics or themes where it would be helpful for you to open up the diversity of views and multiple perspectives that sit around it? How might you use metaphor or fairytale to open up these conversations?

What's an experience that you've had that you are seeking a new perspective on? Are you willing to let go, open up, and see how re-storying this experience using the fairy tale genre might be helpful?

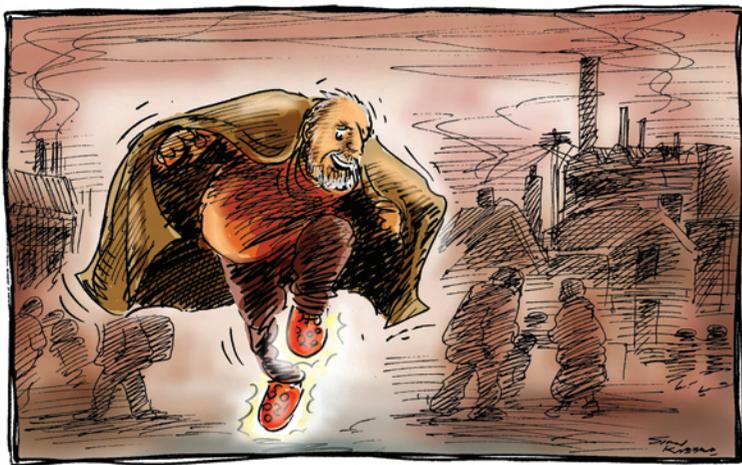


Be who you are and say what
you feel, because those who
mind don't matter and those
who matter don't mind.

Dr Seuss

Once upon a time there was a village in a forest. A dark dark dark dark dark forest. It was even darker than that! And the people in this village all wore drab clothing. And it was boring, boring, boring, boring, boring. And they all dressed in a particular way because the cobbler in the town was ordered by the mayor and the councillors that people had to wear a particular type of shoe. It was a drab, drab, drab, drab, drab boot. And people walked around with no energy at all because that's all they could do in these boots that the cobbler made.

¹³ Another fairytale from our collection of facilitator fairy tales collected from the 2006 Australian Facilitator Network conference held in Geelong; see A. Rixon and S. Kneebone (2007): 'Facilitator fairy tales', <http://www.babelfishgroup.com/files/FacilitatorFairyTales.pdf>.



They went through their dark, boring lives in the dark forest. And then one day – I don't know how he found his way there – a young man came into town. He seemed different to everybody else. He seemed to have energy! He was lively and he moved around. And he started meeting up with the young people – he was teaching them to dance, teaching them to sing, teaching them stuff that they'd never done before! Well the mayor and the councillors had a meeting. They didn't like this because this was not the way they wanted their town run. They preferred

it to be drab, drab, drab, boring – the way that it was! So they contrived a way to get rid of this young man. There was something different about the way that he dressed: he was wearing a different type of shoe. So they chased him out of town and he ran into the forest. But as he ran his shoes came off. Well, nobody had noticed that his shoes had come off...

Until one day the cobbler was walking in the forest and he found the young man's shoes. They were a particular type of shoe. So he took off his drab, drab, drab boot that he'd been making. And he slipped on one of these bright new shoes. All of a sudden, he was transformed: he became energetic; he became more lively; he started to sing; he started to dance! He had discovered the secret: the secret was in these shoes. So he hid them under this shirt and he took them home. He said, 'I wonder if it's just me or if this could be in the shoe?' So he got one of his family members and said, 'Just try this shoe on and see how you feel.' So they tried the shoe on and they started to dance and sing and be transformed by the wearing of the shoe.

I've got to tell you what type of shoe it was: it was a red Croc. A Croc is one of those slip-on plastic shoes with the holes, that seem a bit trendy these days. So the cobbler kept this secret at

home. And he thought What am I going to do with this. Do I want to live the rest of my life as boring, boring, boring, drab, dull... Or do I want to feel alive?

So he secretly started – at night when nobody was looking – making these red Croc shoes. Little by little, under the cover of darkness, his family would start wearing the shoes at night so that nobody would know. Just small groups at a time. And they kept the blinds down but they danced and they sang and they had a fantastic time. Slowly, little by little, as he made more of them, this secret movement started to grow and other families were introduced to this culture. And they started wearing the Crocs. And they started singing and dancing in their houses as well. And before long, the whole village secretly had red Croc shoes. They knew how to sing; they knew how to dance! One day, as if just by some amazing coincidence, they all came outside in the village square wearing their red Croc shoes. And they sang and they danced and they created this enormous fun! Well, the mayor couldn't take it and his councillors couldn't take it and they said, 'What are we going to do? Are we going to get out of town?' So they said 'Cobbler, you'd better get us some red Croc shoes too.' And he did.

And these days that little village exports Croc shoes to the rest of the world, called Croc Heaven. It's a giant corporation. All I can say is that Croc Shoes (particularly red ones) are the way to go. And they all lived happily ever after.



- Adams, Douglas (1979). *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, Harmony Books
- Argyris, C. (1994). 'Good communication that blocks learning', *Harvard Business Review* 72(4): 77-85.
- Angeles Arrien (1993). *The Four Fold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer, and Visionary*, HarperSanFrancisco
- Bettleheim, B. (1976). *The Uses of Enchantment*, Vintage.
- Blanchard, K. and S. Johnson (1983). *The One Minute Manager*, Berkley.
- de Botton, Alain (2009) *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, Penguin Group.
- Covey, Steven, (1989). *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schusterw
- Dick, B. and T. Dalmau (1994). *To Tame a Unicorn – Recipes for Cultural Intervention*, Interchange.
- Hall, C. J., (2005): *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics: Breaking the Language Spell*, Continuum International

Hammond, S. A. (1998). *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, Thin Book Publishing.

Paul Z Jackson and Mark McKergow (2002). *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE*, Nicholas Brealey International.

Jones, S. S. (2002). *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, Routledge.

Klenke, K. (2002). 'Cinderella stories of women leaders: Connecting leadership contexts and competencies', *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 9(2): 18-28.

Le Guin, Ursula (2003). *Tales from Earthsea: Short Stories*, The Orion Publishing Group

Luthi, M. (1976). *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, Indiana University Press.

Monin, N. and J. Monin (2005). 'Hijacking the fairy tale: Genre blurring and allegorical breaching in management literature', *Organization* 12(4): 511-528.

Moxnes, P. (2006). 'Learning group psychology, leadership and anxiety coping by use of fairy tales as educational guide', *Nordic Psychology* 58(1): 5-21.

Rixon, A. and S. Kneebone (2007). 'Facilitator fairy tales', <http://www.babelfishgroup.com/files/FacilitatorFairyTales.pdf>.

Rixon, A (2008). 'Fairy tale – A form of organisational inquiry', *Appreciative Practitioner Journal: The International Journal of AI Best Practice*, February 2008.

Smith, K. K. and V. M. Simmons (1983). 'A Rumpelstiltskin organization: Metaphors on metaphors in field research', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28: 377-392.

Sternin J and R. Choo (2000). 'The Power of Positive Deviance', *Harvard Business Review*, January-February: 14-15.

Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe (2006). *Treading Lightly: The hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people*, Allen and Unwin.

Tatar, M. (1990). *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Princeton University Press.



Andrew first discovered the power of storytelling at the age of 14 when, during a classical guitar lesson, his teacher – having heard him just play something quite mechanically – said, ‘You’ve got to tell a story. What can you picture?’

With one of the first PhDs in Complex Systems and Complexity Science from the University of Queensland completed in June 1999, Andrew had the opportunity to move to Boston and work for a management think tank applying complexity insights to the world of organisations.

The founder and director of the boutique management consulting company Babel Fish Group, Andrew works as a professional facilitator and change consultant and has experience in working with organisations both within Australia and internationally, in the USA, the Netherlands and the UK.

Andrew brings a spirited dynamic presence as a professional speaker, change consultant and workshop leader. Principled, innovative and resourceful, Andrew enjoys living in Melbourne with his wife Sascha and dog George. Andrew can be contacted by email at andrew@babelfishgroup.com.

Praise for Opening Up: Creative Storying at Work

“This little book is a big and timely reminder of the usefulness of stories in a complex world. Andrew Rixon’s wise commentary along with the stories themselves help us remember the importance of relationship as well as task. Some of the stories are fables, others personal. All are pointy and have the tasty tang of paradox. We are offered a gentle nudge, reminding us to slow down, to look back, to reflect. We realise that where there is complexity there is more than one answer.”

Paul Z Jackson, Inspirational coach and co-author of The Solutions Focus, Making Coaching and Change Simple

“This is a book that is artistic, entertaining, and full of practical wisdom. It develops the idea that in a complex work, sometimes doing a simple beginning, middle end narrative is not enough. It is also important to look at the middles, the living stories that have no ending, are in the moment of presentness, and have an openness of time, where multiple endings are still possible.”

David M. Boje, Author of Storytelling Organizations

“Story! For a long time, that was how humans remembered knowledge, and recorded wisdom, and conveyed it to others. Story was what made the knowledge rich and memorable and learnable. There was, and still is, a magic to story that is still available to those of us who use it. Andrew Rixon is one of these people. As he says in many ways in this readable and entertaining book, a time of growing complexity is a time for greater use of story.”

Bob Dick, Inveterate Action Researcher and Author of Helping Groups to be Effective


babelfishgroup

www.babelfishgroup.com

\$24.95 AUD

ISBN 978-0-9803780-2-3



9 780980 378023