

THE LIVING STORY

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Executive Summary

Every client, whether individual or organization, has stories it tells about itself, stories that explain the past, tell what is important and capture identity and aspirations. Some of these stories repeat endless cycles of non-accomplishment, others tell tales of great adventures and enormous achievement. This article explores another kind of story, one that represents the “story-in-the-making” that organizations and individuals are currently living. This is what we call the “Living Story.”

The article first defines the Living Story, noting that it is a story in constant evolution, and a story about the future that must be told repeatedly if it is to come to pass. We explain five fundamental declarations that are contained in most Living Stories, and how each of them reflects an aspect of the client’s growth and development necessary for a successful conclusion to the story.

Next, we ask, “Why stories?” and reflect on the power of the story as a learning and teaching tool, as well as a tool for transmitting culture, values and possibility. We also note that, as a storyteller, you are also “being the story,” actively transmitting that culture, values and possibility, and transforming yourself and others in the process.

As leaders, consultants and coaches, our job is to “listen to the story,” to hear what the client, whether individual or organization, is saying about itself—its hopes, fears and aspirations—and to bring that story into existence. This listening process is a profound one. We must listen above and below what is being said, hearing the metaphors that are used and their implications, as well as what is not being said and should be. By listening that closely and then articulating the story fully, we help the clients become what they desire. We also help clients name their monsters, those elements of their own and other’s behavior that may prevent them from succeeding, as well as help them gain a greater sense of where they are on their journey. Thus there is strategic power in the use of the Living Story.

When we talk about telling the Living Story, we point out that it must answer questions of direction – “where are we going?”, motivation – “what will that get us?” and evidence – “how will we know?” Deep listening is also required here to uncover that information so that the Living Story can develop. We observe that fundamental patterns of human behavior are inevitably reflected in every good story. For example, the pattern that Joseph Campbell labeled the “hero’s journey” is inevitably included. Another pattern that often shows up is that of the basic progressive dynamics of every group. These fractal patterns form the core structures of every Living Story.

We note in conclusion that telling stories changes the storyteller as much as the listener. The power in hearing one’s own story told as a Living Story is that you hear it in a whole new way, and understand its power and implications very differently. What’s key is that we get to hear the story over and over; this is how it embeds itself in us and inexorably moves us from possibility into reality. Storytelling is a skill and an art that all of us can develop; Living Stories are a rich resource for growing and learning, as individuals and as organizations.



The Living Story

In defining the Living Story, we look to Arie de Geus’s definition of the “living company,” drawn from his study of companies that are long-lived. “Like all organisms, the living company exists primarily for its own survival and improvement, to fulfill its potential and to become as great as it can be.” (de Geus, *The Living Company*, p. 11). The Living Story is closely related to this definition. It is the articulation of the past, present and future of a group or organization in story form, so that it expresses their identity, their current reality and their hopes and aspirations. The Story describes the path that needs to be taken to fulfill potential and become great. A Living Story also “anoints role models, imparts values, and shows how to execute indescribably complex tasks.” (Stewart, *Fortune*, 9/7/98, p. 165).

The Living Story is different from other stories in that it is a “work-in-progress.” Part of the story is what has already happened, part is what is current or about to happen, and part is what the client (person or organization) *wants* to have happen. So this Living Story builds from a recognizable reality to a possible future, in ways that excite and motivate listeners. It describes worlds to which those listeners will want to belong, possibilities that they want to be part of.

It is also a form of learning shared with a community, which results in individuals becoming more than they believed possible. Each of us lives our own story; the work we do together becomes a Living Story. Our ability as leaders, coaches and consultants to recognize and articulate the Living Story—often transparent to those who are living it—is a great gift to our clients and colleagues.

The Living Story is complete up to the moment. It may not be fully realized, but it has a beginning, middle and an end that leads to a new beginning. Even when there is tension between what is and what could be, the Living Story has energy, hope and promise. The characters and the action mean there is growth and forward motion, although the organization has not arrived at its destination, yet. It is often a story of commitment, joy and integrity, even in difficult conditions. And *if it is not told until it is familiar, it can be dismissed as a fluke*. If told well and often, the Living Story gets woven into the fabric of our collective and individual identity and becomes the basis for new possibilities.

The Living Story, in anointing role models, imparting values and showing how to execute complex tasks, contains or implies five fundamental declarations found in Speech Acts theory. The first declaration is “No.” The Living Story sets boundaries, and shows what is not acceptable behavior. It makes it possible to decline, to promise not to do something. The second is “Yes.” With a reliable “no” in the system, the Living Story shows how to promise or affirm certain actions and values. The characters can make and keep agreements. There is identity and definition for the self and the community or organization.

The third is “I don’t know.” In a Living Story there is space for learning and people can admit their ignorance, ask their questions. Characters are not punished for learning. Fourth, in a Living Story, there is a declaration of gratitude. There are ways and times to say “thank you” to one another and to the world. People know when agreements are complete because they are thanked for their contributions and are free to appreciate the steps in the journey and to move on to the next challenge.

Finally, in a Living Story there is forgiveness. People say “I’m sorry” when they have unintentionally hurt someone. They can ask forgiveness as well. Not every Living Story is overtly about these fundamental conversations, but every healthy story has space for all of them. An organization or individual that is lacking one or more will be, to some degree, less than fully alive.

We instinctively differentiate the Living Story from the stagnating or dead-end stories that we human beings sometimes create and get lost in. Those stories are full of historical reasons for how things are, blame enough to go around, and assumptions of fixed identity. The deadening stories cycle endlessly. They are told over and over, sometimes passionately and sometimes with resignation, in the vain hope that by doing the same things we will get different results.

The Living Story is not the circular story of “it’s always been this way” or “that’s just how things work around here” or “that is just the way I am.” The Living Story includes possibilities for learning and change and points the way to new futures. Listening to circular (dead) stories drains the life out of individuals and organizations

and the leaders, coaches and consultants who work with them. The Living Story is life affirming, life-giving. It may require nurturing, but it lives.



Why Stories?

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

In the process, the human brain became hardwired for holding complex information in story form and for learning through stories. Stories operate as much at the limbic level as they do at the neo-cortical level. In other words, stories are processed in our mammalian brains as much as they are by our thinking brains. Notice what happens when people hear the words, “I’m going to tell you a story.” They relax. They open up. They listen. They become neurologically receptive to new information and new possibilities. The result of that state is that people retain more of what they hear, they internalize it and take it to “usability” more effectively.

A story that is well timed and well told is vicarious learning, the next best thing to first-hand experience. In some instances—where the experience could be life-threatening—it may be the best thing. In a *Harvard Business Review* article on “Strategic Stories,” the authors note that “A good story (and a good strategic plan) defines relationships, a sequence of events, cause and effect, and a priority among items—and those elements are likely to be remembered as a complex whole.” (*Harvard Business Review*, 5-6/98, p. 42)

We are all inevitably storytellers, weaving together selected bits of the complex flow of life into some semblance of coherence. Human beings are meaning-making creatures. In the absence of information or a shared story, we will fill in gaps with our own assumptions and create a story. Think how quickly rumors spread and get told with increasing authority. Notice, as well, how two people will attend the same meeting and have very different reports. Our mood, our past experience, our culture, our gender, our beliefs are just some of the filters through which we sift the data of our lives and select our story. And this filtering process exists collectively in

organizations as well. What we pay attention to shapes the stories we tell. And the stories we've been told shape what we pay attention to.

Stories are a form of language as action. In other words, in telling the story you are not simply "talking about", you are *being* and *doing* the story. A story not only expresses motivation, it motivates. It not only describes learning; it embodies, reflects and causes learning. As the group's story evolves and grows, it becomes a vehicle through which the group can act "as if" and bring new ideas and worlds into being.



Hearing A Story Being Lived

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

We constitute or build our relationships and our identities through language. What we declare changes reality. What we request, what we decline, the promises we make and the promises we keep, open and close possibilities for ourselves and for others. The questions we ask are the questions we will answer. The unimagined question is not answered. This leads to at least three powerful listening directions for the consultant:

- ◆ listening for the metaphors within the organization,
- ◆ listening for what is not said—the unspoken and undiscussable story—and
- ◆ listening to and affirming the Living Story.

Metaphors can capture complex experiences in a phrase. Those metaphors contain both possibilities and limitations. One of the most profound shifts in understanding organizations is the movement from machine metaphors to organic metaphors for describing the organization (as in the work of Margaret Wheatley). Consider these examples:

- ◆ "organization as machine" and "organization as a living and learning system"
- ◆ the direction to "break into groups" in contrast to the direction to "form groups"
- ◆ the possibility for win-win solutions in an organization that "rallies the troops to crush the competition"
- ◆ the possibility of individual meaning in "a well-oiled machine"

- ◆ the role of those who staff the plant closing: “going down with the ship” or “the crew of a proud, final voyage”?
- ◆ Managers’ role: “growing the business” or “putting out fires”?
- ◆ organization as “a team”, “a family”, “a community of practice”, “a war zone”...?

With each shift in the metaphor, very different possibilities emerge. Sometimes shifting the metaphors will open stunning new horizons, with profound strategic implications.

Without reflection there is no learning. If we want to have learning in organizations there must be time and space for reflection. There is nothing like telling the story and really listening to it to bring out the “what” (a significant event or accomplishment), the “so what” (how we make meaning from it) and the “now what”(what happens next) of an innovation or a challenge well met.

Listening for the Living Story is sometimes a matter of hearing the exceptions in the problem stories. Sometimes we can go directly for the Living Story with Appreciative Inquiry or other interventions that ask, “What works here?” When something new and wonderful happens, we need to pause and listen. We need to make a space for the new and good to be told in story form until it becomes part of the familiar, the fabric of daily life.

Similarly, we need to make room for what is new and bad. When changes result in negative feelings that are not given recognition, what cannot be said consumes the energy of the organization. It takes effort to suppress thoughts and feelings. It takes effort to walk around the unacknowledged “elephant in the room”. It takes resources to feed and house the elephant. Sometimes part of the work of the story is to help the organization name the elephant, or the monster that lives in the dark.

Particularly in a fast-changing environment, “current reality” may be coming faster than the stories can keep up with it. This is not trivial. In the words of Thurman Arnold, an American lawyer, “Men believe that a society is disintegrating when it can no longer be pictured in familiar terms. Unhappy is a people that has run out of words to describe what is going on.” A group or individual does something extraordinary and there is no moment of recognition, much less the learning phase of “So What?” or the growing phase of “Now What?” As a result, there is no narrative of what happened, and no meaning made from it.

We also owe it to each other to keep our stories up to date. If we want people to change and grow, we need to keep updating our stories of who and how they are or we will miss the very behavior we have been developing in them. If we want to change and grow ourselves, we need to keep updating the stories we tell about ourselves. Keeping our own and others’ stories current is part of the skill of listening

for the Living Story. A Living Story is constantly unfolding. If you haven't listened for a while, the story has changed.



Telling the Story

Every story requires a storyteller. We are all storytellers, although we may not be professional or especially accomplished storytellers. Because we spend so much time with media created by others, polished and edited and packaged, many have come to believe that storytelling belongs outside themselves. So let's be clear now. There are stories that fit in the sitcom time slot, there are stories that are told in a country and western song or a rap, there are stories adapted for the screen. Those may have once been Living Stories. They are not necessarily Living Stories now.

Living Stories are told by people through words and actions -- and silences. They may or may not be polished and rehearsed. They may not even be entertaining or "told well". They may be all of those things or they may be very mundane. Mostly, they are what is heard when "who you are thunders so loudly, I cannot hear what you say." According to Muriel Rukeyser, "The world is made of stories, not of atoms." One of our spouses fondly remembers hot summer evenings on the back porch of his grandparents' place in Texas listening to stories and watching fireflies. We don't give ourselves much back porch time these days and we forget that each of us is telling a story. In fact, you can't *not* tell your story. The questions are "What is your story?" and "How invitingly is it told?"

Thus, Living Story is always being told, intentionally or not. Being intentional about telling stories means that we choose to give airtime and heart space to stories that are generative, that will bring new awareness and open possibilities. This can be done in words, images, movement or combinations of these. Most important is a relationship of respect and responsiveness between teller and listeners. As master storyteller Ed Stivender says, "The only good story is a live story, told responsively, respectfully of the widows and orphans in the house and responsibly to the etiquette of the tribes and wigwams where you work." (*The Storyteller's Guide*, p. 48)

For Living Stories, good storytelling starts with good listening *before* the story. It starts with listening for answers to these three fundamental questions:

- ◆ What does the group or the individual want, need, or desire?
- ◆ What might getting that outcome get the individual or the group? In other words, what is the ultimate meaning of this story?
- ◆ How will the individual or the group know? What will they hear, see, and feel that tells them the outcome has been achieved?

You're listening for expressions of people's aspiration and purpose. You'll hear it in their emotions, their moods and their assessments, which tell you what they believe is

possible, and thus serve as windows to the soul of the group. Not that you'll hear it in jewel-like form, each facet neatly polished. Your job may be to detect the diamond-in-the-rough and to help the group do the cutting and polishing. As you listen, interestingly enough, you'll find yourself being changed--your own sense of possibilities evolving and developing.

Storytelling is a practice. We shape our story to our audience, telling the Living Story with respect for the uniqueness of the listeners at every moment of each telling. We respect the ability of the organization or individual to make the meaning they need from the story at a given moment in time. As conscious storytellers we use the whole story--the beginning, the middle and the end, the words and silences, the details and the ambiguities--to connect with the listeners and invite them into the story. At the same time, we invite the listeners to stand outside the story and hear it from a new perspective, one of reflection and learning. We hold our sense of their story lightly, and instead, tell the story in response to the listeners. We make a space in which the listeners can think and include ideas to think about. We touch the five senses and the heart. And we use the silences within the story to allow the listeners to make the story their own.

"Stories are fractals. They are necessary, basic and dangerous in that they can't be controlled by our striving intellects. They are the container, the elements, the process and the trigger of transformation." (Cary and Underwood, *Learning Organizations*, p. 129) Stories give structure to complex interactions like change processes, team interactions, growing a business, making hard decisions. Ultimately, every story is a variation of what Joseph Campbell called "The Hero's Journey" (the basic fractal pattern). The individual or group leaves the known world--their past--for a variety of reasons, and on the journey, enters the "pit," wherein lies the monster. The monster (in actuality a reflection of their needs to grow and develop) must be confronted, and the learning must be done in order for the heroes to complete the journey, be changed in the process and become ready for new action.

Often, stories and their heroes get stuck in the pit. The heroes are afraid to meet the monster, accept uncertainty or allow change. Similarly, there are archetypal family patterns that help us understand this "stuckness" in a project or group: the need for nurturing during childhood, the adolescent period of testing the boundaries and oneself, and then maturation into productivity and generativity. The dynamics of every group's development are captured in "forming, storming, norming and performing". These are also basic fractal patterns.



Conclusion

Like the fish that can't see water, we don't always know our own story. We don't always know where our deepest motivations lie. And there is a profound deepening of our own experience when we hear it as a story. That deepening enables us to move more purposefully, to engage our passion and focus and bring ourselves more fully into our lives when we hear and recognize our Living Story. Telling the group's Living Story makes each individual story everyone else's as well. It makes it one story of which all want to be a part, and see through to the outcome. While telling it, you are watching for what's working, what's resonating, what's stirring people. Even though you may be telling people their own words, they're learning as they listen, learning about what is most deeply meaningful to them about their own story.

All aspects of hearing and telling the Living Story are natural gifts to be developed. As we practice hearing and telling Living Stories, we find that the stories take on a life of their own. They are part of our innate drive to make meaning in our lives. As the tellers, we're simply the conduits, the vehicle through which the stories come. Like Michelangelo removing everything that wasn't the sculpture, we may discover that we simply need to recognize the story and get out of the way. The Living Story will tell itself.

What's critical is that the story be told, over and over. Only then, both neurologically and spiritually, will people come to believe that the new possibilities the story represents are theirs for the taking. As leaders, as consultants, as coaches, we are part of that quest for meaning in organizations and communities. We are part of the Living Story. We are in service as we hear and tell the Living Story, participants in creation of the future to which we all want to belong.

The authors are consultants and coaches who collaborate together and work individually and collectively with the Living Stories all round them on both coasts and in between. They can be reached via e-mail: Karen@infrasonicsco.com, JanetLCrawford@comcast.net, lisa@smartworkco.com.