TELLING CHANGES: FROM NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPY TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE & DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how developments in the groundbreaking field of narrative family therapy might be applied to organizational change efforts. After an introductory discussion of some of narrative therapy's key orientations and practices (e.g., postmodern notions of language and power, influence mapping, problem externalization, unique outcomes, audiencing), an extended example is given where a narrative approach was used to effect change in a health-care organization. The case is used to generate a series of research questions and directions.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, narrativity has become an increasingly popular and accepted lens in organizational studies.   Whereas organizational stories once played bit parts in researchers' accounts (e.g., Dalton's, 1959 inclusion of executives' stories in his theory of management, or Allison's, 1971 narrative-based theory of decision making), today they are increasingly used as key explanators of organizational life. In the quest to understand organizations as story-bearing phenomena, researchers have focused on how narratives are languaged (e.g., Barley's 1983 semiotic study of funeral rituals), on various forms of narrative tellings (e.g., Van Maanen's 1988 "tales of the field" and Boje's 1991 exploration of "terse tellings"), and on how narratives are interpreted (e.g., Barry & Elmes' 1997 discussion of strategy-as-story, Czarniawska-Joerges' 1996 account of organizations as texts, and Weick's 1979 work on sensemaking).

Still, it might be argued that the story of organizational storytelling has just begun. This is certainly true if one takes a pragmatist stance (Rorty, 1982): for all the interest organizational narrativity has generated amongst researchers, one cannot help but wonder if those working in and with organizations are much the better for it. In particular, I have increasingly found myself asking how narrativist considerations might inform an area that is concerned with large scale betterment: organizational change. How might narrativist writings, which tend to take a non-utilitarian, postmodernist slant, be used to inform organizational change, which is often enacted in distinctly utilitarian and modernist ways?

In some ways, grounds for a partnership already exist. Though many of the frameworks used by organizational change and development practitioners presume "authorial" expertise rooted in the notion of an objective, independent reality (e.g., organizational redesign, profit sharing systems, total quality management, and reengineering programs), there are others which take more of a "client knows best" (or at least "client knows better") position. Historically, the Action Research school has adopted this stance; consultants following an AR model see their primary role as helping clients to find their own solutions. More recently, interventionist approaches informed by "interpretive" (cf. Hiley et. al., 1991), "constructivist" (cf. Schwandt, 1994), and "symbolist" views (cf. Gagliardi, 1990), have arisen, each stressing the importance of understanding in the change process.

Change agents working from these perspectives take a largely subjective view of things, seeing organizational reality as something that is evanescent and locally defined. Understanding and loosening of meanings-in-use are considered fundamental requirements of any change project (cf. Barry, 1994; Frost & Egri, 1994; Hazen, 1993, 1994; and Reason & Hawkins, 1988). Considerable effort normally goes into "symbolic constructivism" of some sort (Geertz, 1980: 177. See also Barry, 1996): pivotal symbols are located and/or constructed, imbued with meaning, and used to catalyze behavioral, cognitive, attitudinal, and emotional changes. Reflecting work with cognitive schemas and sensemaking (cf. Gioia et. al., 1994; Weick, 1995), it is assumed that if organizational members can better understand how they construct themselves and their organization, they will be better able to address their problems.

To this latter, growing chorus I would like to add another voice, one which links considerations of change to a postmodern, social constructionist version of narrative

theory. Specifically, I wish to explore how the groundbreaking work of narrative therapists White & Epston (1990), Freedman & Combs (1996), Monk et. al. (1997), and Parry & Doan (1994) might inform organizational change efforts.

Unlike most narrative theorizing, the narrative therapy tradition is intensely concerned with facilitating change. Developed by practitioners who have had to collectively cope with thousands of social psychological problems (many of them life threatening), this work reflects both an aversion to expert-imposed solutions and a fascination with clients' ways of knowing. Compared to much of the organizational change literature, narrative therapy is thoroughly steeped in considerations of philosophy, literary theory, history, and anthropology—it provides an enticing model of how scholarly work in the humanities might be linked to practice. It also challenges the often unvoiced assumption that change theory, if it is to work, must have scientific relatives (consider Lewin's force field model, punctuated equilibrium theory, or even action research with its experimentalist focus).

Not surprisingly, narrative therapy stresses the creation of "literate" symbols (White & Epston, 1990); as such, it shares elements with other symbolic and metaphoric change methods (cf. Barry, 1996; Morgan, 1986, 1993). Yet, because it is rooted in narrative construction, it attends more to time, ordering, wording, consultant positioning, story performance, and audiencing, all of which are important considerations in organizational change. As anthropologist Edward Bruner explains:

> ... narrative structure has an advantage over such related concepts as a metaphor or paradigm in that narrative emphasizes order and sequence, in a formal sense, and is more appropriate for the study of change, the life-cycle, or any developmental process. Story as a model has a remarkable dual aspect—it is both linear and instantaneous (quoted in White & Epston, 1990: 3).

Somewhat masked in Bruner's statement is that narrative itself is a metaphor for practice; as such it leads to methods that differ considerably from frameworks anchored in other metaphors. Whereas machine models of organizational problems lead to repair-based solutions, organic models to corrections of pathologies, game models to counter-strategies, dramaturgic models to role revisions, and ritualist models to passage from one status to another, narrative (or textual) models emphasize "opening space for the authoring of alternative stories" (White & Epston, 1990: 15).

In the following sections, I briefly review two key tenets of this approach and then go on to consider how some of its most important change-related concepts might be applied to organizational settings (Note: this review only highlights the tip of what is a very extensive body of writing).

SOME ORIENTING TENETS IN NARRATIVE THERAPY

A basic assumption among most narrative therapists is that people's lives are heavily influenced by the sensemaking stories they tell about themselves (a view mirrored by organizational cognitivists Gioa et al, 1994 and Weick, 1995). What gets included in these stories may or may not be helpful; often, clients looking for help feel caught in a problem saturated story which they have little or no influence over. As narrative therapist Karl Tomm (1987) states:

> Not only do we, as humans, give meaning to our experience by "storying" our lives, we are empowered to "perform" our stories through our knowledge of them. . . . Some of these stories promote competence and wellness. Others serve to constrain, trivialize, disqualify, or otherwise pathologize ourselves, others, and our relationships. Still other stories can be reassuring, uplifting, liberating, revitalizing, or healing. The particular story that prevails or dominates in giving meaning to the events of our lives, to a large extent determines the nature of our lived experience and our patterns of action. When a problem saturated story predominates, we are repeatedly invited into disappointment and misery. (in Epston & White, 1989: 7).

These self-stories can be quite fragmented, unexamined, and partial in their accounting of events. Often, it seems the more problem saturated the story, the more disparate its construction—fractionalization helps keep the story at bay, making it seem less overwhelming. But it can also make change more difficult to effect. Thus, narrative therapists attempt to become careful readers and reflectors of client stories; considerable efforts are made to join piecemeal story elements into something that is simultaneously more congruent and graspable.

A second, related tenet is that stories and power are fundamentally interconnected. Michael White (cf. 1991) has probably done the most to articulate this thinking within the narrative therapy field (other narrative theorists have also examined the power/story relationship—cf. Hanne, 1994). Drawing extensively from Foucault's writings, he argues that individuals often find themselves in untenable positions because they have unwittingly succumbed to power-laden categories used in societal discourse. People, having been labeled "schizophrenic", "obsessive", and "neurotic" by various experts, proceed to construct themselves accordingly. Instead of "making the problem the problem", persons experiencing problems are problematized. Once in this position, a sense of helplessness and loss of personal agency can arise, making self-initiated change quite difficult.

This view strongly resonates with social constructionist thought: categories and interpretations used by storytellers are caught up in social "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973: 5), webs which keep some in power and others disempowered, some as confident spiders and others as silkwrapped flies. From these (and other related assumptions), a number of unique and frequently effective "devictimizing" methods have been developed; here I discuss several which I feel have the potential to assist organizational change efforts: influence mapping, problem externalization, identifying unique outcomes, and story audiencing.

Influence Mapping. Given the often fragmented nature of problem saturated accounts, an important facet of narrative therapy is the development of expanded tellings, ones which have a more coherent, story-like character and in which the teller assumes a more agentic role. White & Epston (1990) suggest expanding tellings through a process of "influence mapping," where interrelationships between persons and problems are assigned a temporal dimension.

Influence mapping results in stories that "collapse time"—events which influence one another are juxtaposed in ways that signal the full import of the problem. As White states:

> Problems in families usually occur within the context of a trend in which the problem has become more 'influential' over time. These trends are usually imperceptible—the outcome of the phenomenon of accommodation. . . . The therapist locates the problem within the context of a trend and renders this trend 'newsworthy' by encouraging family members to draw distinctions between the 'state of affairs' at one point in time and the 'state of affairs' at another point in time. To assist in this endeavor, a 'time' language is introduced. Descriptions are applied to trends in a way that, by implicating the past and predicting the future, collapses time on such trends. (1989: 89).

White & Epston (1990: 42) suggest two forms of influence mapping: mapping the influence of the problem on persons and mapping the influence of persons on the problem. In problem-based mapping, clients are asked to detail the various ways the problem has affected their life (e.g., "How has depression affected your relation with yourself?"). This has the effect of making the problem less monolithic and more dynamic—the problem is seen as occurring at different times and in different ways. Person-based mapping asks the client to recount ways s/he has influenced the problem, resulting in a greater sense of agency. A sample question here might be "What ideas, habits, and feelings feed the problem?" (Freedman & Combs, 1996: 124).

Problem Externalization. As long as the storyteller characterizes herself as the problem, she has little room to maneuver—wherever she goes, the problem goes too, preventing other views from arising. Problem externalization is assisted by deconstructive listening (Freedman & Combs, 1996: 46), a reflective approach which helps separate a problem-saturated story from its teller. Narrative therapists assume that the act of reading and reflecting back a client's story involves active interpretation, an act which can happen in more or less helpful ways. As with Iser's reader-response theory (1989), the reading act is construed as one of textual recomposition—bits of the heard story are reassembled into a para-story, one which resembles the original but also decenters it. A memorable example is provided by White & Epston, as they recount their experiences with Nick, a young boy with a long history of encopresis:

> Rarely did a day go by without an "accident" or "incident," which usually meant the "full works" in his underwear. To make matters worse, Nick had befriended the "poo." The poo had become his playmate. . . . When mapping the influence of family members in the life of what we came to call "Sneaky Poo," we discovered that although Sneaky Poo always tried to trick Nick into being his playmate, Nick could recall a number of occasions during which he had not allowed Sneaky Poo to "outsmart" him. (1990: 43-46).

By reconstructing Nick's encopresis as a episodic struggle between Nick-as-protagonist and Sneaky Poo-as-antagonist, White & Epston effectively separated Nick from his problem. Sneaky Poo, as a kind of Winnie-the-Poo doppelganger, was now something distinct from Nick, some-*thing* he could exert influence over. This form of reframing loosens one's hold on a particular reality, inviting a person into the "liminal" (Turner, 1982), a place in which "the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance (p. 44)." The liminal

(from the German "limen", meaning threshold) represents a moment of symbolic fluidity where multiple realities can coexist.

Identifying Unique Outcomes. In the previous example, White & Epston found a previously untold part of Nick's story—a "unique outcome"— where Nick had turned the tables on Sneaky Poo. Using these moments as a referent, they encouraged him to expand this alternate story. How had he managed to foil Sneaky Poo's efforts? What was he thinking and feeling? What happened after the confrontation? Finding unique outcomes is a unique practice—comparatively, many contemporary change models rely on the creation of an imagined, not-yet-experienced future, one which is "visioned" in some way (cf. Nanus, 1992). The problem with such models is that fantasized futures can be easily discounted—as fiction, they lack a certain credibility. And since they inevitably fail to materialize as imagined, such futures can lead to a continuing sense of failure and self-blame. In comparison, the unique outcome approach provides storytellers with historical, unassailably concrete evidence that things can be different.

As alternate accounts are identified and fleshed out, the original storyteller is faced with a series of what Bateson (1980: 97) termed "double or multiple comparisons." Placed side by side, these "double descriptions" (White, 1989: 88), help create "news of difference which makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972: 453). No longer is there a sole, dominating account of the problem. In classically deconstructionist fashion, what was once a totalizing truth has now become simply one of several stories. "THE STORY" has become "a story" and the teller, sitting in the protagonist's seat, has more options. S/he can decide which story version is preferable and has some idea of how that preferred story might be enacted.

Audiencing. Consonant with the dramaturgical idea that social reality is constructed through a community of players and witnesses to the play, narrative therapists stress the concepts of performance and audiencing. An essential part of constructive audiencing is acknowledging and encouraging a storyteller's efforts. Thus, the narrative therapist acts as an enthusiastic audience, applauding client efforts to author and enact a preferred story. This recognition happens not only during conversations with the client, but at other times as well. Within White & Epston's work (1990), recognition often occurs through letters they write to their clients. These letters may take a number of forms (e.g., letters which invite missing family members to a session, letters which predict client outcomes, "letters of reference" which clients can show to interested others). These letters have an important symbolic function—they not only help concretize the re-authoring project, but provide tangible evidence of support and interest.

NARRATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

While many hundreds of cases suggest that narrative therapy works well with individuals, couples, and families, at the organizational level it remains a series of intriguing possibilities. On the one hand, there are a number of reasons why the approach might be applicable to organizations: 1) organizations are frequently viewed in family-like terms—as clans (Ouchi, 1980), paternalistic systems (Casey, 1995), and as multigenerational cultures (Martin, 1992); 2) many of the problems found in families are also found in organizations (e.g., issues of identity, survival,

well being, social positioning, power, coordinated effort, and conflicting meanings); 3) narrative therapy uses some of the same systems-based concepts that underpin many organizational practices (cf., Freedman & Combs, 1996: 2-8); and 4) other approaches derived from family therapy have been successfully applied to large scale organizations (e.g., Smith's 1989 use of splitting and triangulation theory to predict conflict shifts within a New England town).

Yet there are (arguably) some difficulties with transferring the approach: 1) narrative therapists tend to work with small numbers of problems. Comparatively, organizations have enormous numbers of both problems and solutions floating about, making the question of problem focus especially salient; 2) organizations, because of their size, are harder to grasp and understand than families, couples, and individuals; 3) organizations are increasingly characterized by changing membership, making relationally-based change less relevant; and 4) families and couples are not organized to achieve the same ends as large organizations are.

This was as far as my thinking had gone when my back started hurting. A colleague, Margaret (a pseudonym) suggested I go to Osteo Ltd. (another pseudonym), an osteopathy clinic she frequented (osteopathy is similar to chiropractic but uses different movements). She had arranged to help Osteo's owners (Sarah and Will) with marketing in exchange for bodywork sessions and suggested I do the same: swap management consulting for back cracking. At first I laughed. But my back was getting worse.

I broached the matter with Will during my second treatment, somewhere between the fifth and sixth vertebrae. In muffled tones (talking through the face hole of a massage table), I not only suggested we do a barter, but experiment with using a narrativist approach. I tried explaining how narrativist work might go, only to conclude that Will's hands had a far better sense of direction than I did. Will said he would talk it over with Sarah and, within a few days, it was agreed that the four of us (Will, Sarah, Margaret, and myself) would meet to discuss Osteo.

Prior to the meeting, I talked with several other staff members, trying to familiarize myself with Osteo's operations. I mostly listened as they described what they did, what they liked and disliked about Osteo. When meeting with Will & Sarah, I asked, "What would you like to come of our work together?" As they talked, I took notes while Margaret sketched metaphoric images; we had agreed earlier that multiple renditions of Osteo might help create some useful "double descriptions."

It became clear the practice was awash with problems. Of the three clinics, only one was surviving financially. The fifteen staff members were in various stages of revolt, complaining of inadequate training and direction. Some had just been hired and others fired, creating an air of anxious uncertainty. Both Will and Sarah felt distressed and guilty about the recent layoffs. No one knew where the money was coming from or going to. Perhaps not surprisingly, there was little sense of strategic direction. Will favored selling off the unprofitable clinics; Sarah argued heatedly for keeping them. Sarah and Will looked wan and dejected; both were working twelve hour days to keep the business afloat.

I found myself overwhelmed by old consulting habits; though I had rejected the use of a standardized diagnostic framework, a host of solutions still clamoured for

attention: "If they could just get their strategy straight, things should fall into line . . . maybe some teambuilding . . . better accounting and scheduling software . . . perhaps a gainsharing program?"

Because of time constraints on my part, and because Will's and Sarah's narratives seemed to mirror much of what was going on at Osteo, I decided to work just with them for the time being. I also began listening for "internalized" problem descriptions, ones where Will and Sarah had in some way characterized themselves as problems. When asked what they thought needed the most attention, two things emerged: administrative competence and overwork. These were also highly internalized issues: Sarah repeatedly described herself as an "administrative incompetent," and Osteo as an "administrative nightmare" while Will frequently said "We are all overworked here."

Following our meeting, Margaret and I constructed visual and written portraits of our experience thus far; these were sent to Sarah and Will about three days later. In the first picture, Will and Sarah were pictured as having fallen into a wishing well— their wish-come-true business had turned into a prison. Will was trying to reach Joyce, a particularly angry employee who had just been given notice (Joyce is depicted as reaching for help with one hand and making a fist with the other). Sarah, shackled to the wall, watches helplessly as their savings pour away.

In a second portrait, Will was pictured as a faceless, multi-tasking therapist who worked with clients in a "cookie-cutter" fashion. Body bits that failed to make it through the mold were scattered at the bottom of the table. And off in the distance was a finish line—Will maintained that if he could "bite the bullet" and see enough clients, he would be able to retire to the good life. This "mass production" approach had been part of Will's training in England—as an apprentice, he had been expected to treat over 20 clients a day.

I composed a letter along the lines discussed earlier. I attempted to externalize the problems of administrative competence and overwork, as well as call attention to alternative accounts. The questions asked were designed to temporalize the problems and to begin creating a sense of agency.

Table 1: An Initial Letter to Sarah & Will

Dear Sarah & Will,

We found ourselves chatting so much about your business after our meeting . . . it was as if we had been drinking Turkish cappuccinos instead of filtered water! We were intrigued by the different issues you brought up and excited by the various possibilities. We appreciate that you are fun people who aren't having a very good time right now and so we are approaching this process by creating story characters, ones we hope you can help us flesh out.

For now, your collective story seems to revolve around two characters. ***Overwork*** and ***Administrative Angst***. In your telling, they seemed like close cousins or an old married couple— one was never far from the other.

Overwork: When you talked about all the work you do, we got an image of you running as hard as you're able for the finish line, only to find that someone had moved it back out of sight. And when you talked of the future, the word "faceless" came up a lot. A picture came to us of heaps of bodies, their forgotten faces removed. It gave us the shivers. Margaret thought of it being like a meatworks . . . "Who's leg is this?" she said, holding a pen in the air.

Administrative Angst: When you talked of administration, I (David), got an image of a dark cave . . . a slippery, confusing place where things nip and bite at your heels. There are lots of things hiding in that cave: old things—like Will's memory of the "body-factory" back in England, a nagging dislike for the financial side of things, and questions about whether you are worth the money you charge. And newer things—like your shaken up feelings after having let go of Joyce, and worries about not being able to tend to all the business details. We empathized with your concerns over installing a heavy-handed administrative system, one at odds with your beliefs in empowering and enjoyable work. And we know it must be tough to want to spread your work, to do this in a way that honors both your needs, and yet not know how to go about it (or even what "it" is, exactly).

We also were impressed by your resolve to tackle these things. We especially liked your story about hiring Fran. It was clear to us you know a lot about surrounding yourselves with the right people, people who, like you, "can deal with things in the face of adversity" (Sarah's quote). The questions Sarah asked when interviewing Fran, the things she attended to . . . it seemed like she was a hiring expert for a big consulting outfit! We wondered where she got those skills—what's the story here?

We were similarly impressed with Will's ingenuity in dealing with the lawyer, how he managed to surface and work with all those life issues buried in the lawyer's muscles, how he was able to provide empathy and care even after working so hard. Where did this ability come from? What is its history?

Our interview brought up many questions for us and we are excited at the prospect of co-authoring a new story. Below are some of the questions we're thinking and wondering about, things we hope to discuss at our next meeting.

- *What images and/or names would you assign to **Overwork** and **Administrative Angst**?*

- *What have the careers of these characters been? How is it that both these characters have gotten such high-paying jobs?*

- *Sarah, what will you have to do to guarantee the survival of these characters? Will, what must you do to make sure these characters continue to prosper?*

- *What names and images might you assign to your natural **Skills** and **Talents**? What would they look like if you drew them?*

- *We wonder what would happen if **Skills** and **Talents** met up with **Overwork** and **Administrative Angst**? What would the conversation sound like?*

We are greatly looking forward to our next meeting and to hearing how your story(ies) has been evolving.

All the best,

David and Margaret

When we next met (about a month later), it was evident that things had begun to change. Both Sarah and Will found the images very haunting and felt shaken by our construction of their story. Meanwhile, they had found ways to do some business planning and enjoy themselves at the same time. Will felt more inclined to tackle the administrative load, yet still felt anxious about having enough time to handle it properly. Margaret, directed by Will, created a portrait of him as a leashed dog straining to chase an 'administrative cat.'

Lastly, I attempted to get Sarah and Will thinking about how their relationship with Overwork and Administrative Angst had changed. Following White & Epston's

(1990: 116) example, I asked Sarah and Will to estimate the percentage of influence each character now had in their lives. These points were summarized through more drawings and another letter (see Table 2)

Table 2: Followup letter from the second meeting

Dear Will & Sarah,

As before, we'd like to share some of our "takes" on the conversation we heard last night—and we invite you to add to and comment on our interpretations. After leaving the meeting, we both commented on the different feel that this meeting had (from the one before).

Sarah, you seemed to capture it when you said you felt more comfortable "opening up." We also felt more opened too—it felt okay to share some of our own transitions with you. There was quite a flow of images this time, not only from Margaret's pencil, but from both of you as well.

In our last letter, we expressed a desire for you to help us flesh out the characterisation of **Overwork** and **Administrative Angst**. You seemed to be more in the spirit of this process. For instance, the additions you made to **Angst** started bringing it to life . . .

Will, you've begun to create an "**Angst**" scenario: there's "Mr. P. (Poor) Victim." . . . and the image of the snarling dog that wanted to "move to the next game," but who felt tied to a stake, unable to attack the elusive "cat" of administrative responsibility. The leash seemed to have something to do with "time-based fear" . . . fear of not having enough time, fear of diminished relaxation time. Enter **Overwork**: Sarah's depiction of Mr. P. Victim as someone sitting behind a desk, someone who hadn't shaved, eaten, or slept in quite a while. And Will owned this by saying he'd felt quite stressed over the last couple of weeks. Sarah added to the scene by bringing in the notion of overcontrol (holding the leash of the beast), saying that sometimes her wish to have everything work predictably leads to a sense of anxiousness.

We're beginning to see how things are changing for you—you told us about your Saturday/Sunday "planning retreat." This incident was quite different from the old story—the picture of you sitting at the Devonport cafe, smiling, conversing easily, privately, creating joint understanding about your future—this contrasted with the other images of being imprisoned by your work. And then, there was the comment that these "initial characters," (and the problems they were causing), had been robbed of 20% of their influence. That is, they had only 80% of their previous effect. Have both characters lost 20% of their influence?

Somehow (and we're extremely curious about the "how" part), you managed to combine work and relaxation in a way that suited both of you. Even though we didn't get to hear as much about it as we'd have liked, we were struck by how "soft" you were when recollecting that time and by how you were able to create time for yourselves, despite your tiredness and many commitments.

Sarah, you described how you found **a way to give** . . . by listening to Will's desire to "go somewhere other than where I work", and by somehow overcoming your disappointment when Will returned home with his parents in tow (after you thought you were going to have private time with him).

Will, you somehow found the **energy and resolve** to part with your parents and have an intimate, enjoyable discussion about management and planning. If you were going title this scenario, any suggestions? How would you flesh out the characters involved? Would you name them?

You both identified the Devonport "planning retreat" scene as a preferred one. Will, you also brought up the fascinating dilemma of how you feel "accustomed" to the old dog-on-the-chain story. What's it like, having one paw in one story and another paw in a different one? We wonder about your vacillation between wanting to expand the business or keep it smaller . . . is the vacillation part of the old story or the new one? Sarah, have you got some attachments to the old story too? This all ties

back to the question (which we never really managed to get to) of what you both *must* do to insure the survival of **Overwork** and **Administrative Angst**.

We notice some other shifts happening. Through your planning retreat and other discussions, you seem to be creating a clearer picture of the numbers, and of how much you need to achieve your goals. This scenario seems different from the old story. Does having more clarity around the numbers affect other parts of your work/life? You talked of changing the hours you're working (going to thirty minute sessions): how does this feel? Your vision of the future also seems tighter, more coherent now—you seem more determined to support your business from the hammock of delegation rather than from the tightrope of constantly balancing the budget.

We also wonder if you've started bringing the rest of the staff into this picture . . . what is their relationship to **Administrative Angst** and **Overwork**? How might they tell the story?

We'd like you to consider the following:

- *Will, in reference to your "dog" picture, just what does that **stake** represent? The **leash**? And who put you in that situation?*

- *Sarah, what resources, skills, and/or talents have you drawn on that have allowed you to delegate, relax, kick back more, and control less (or perhaps find a more satisfying form of control)?*

- *Back to the beginning of the story—how did you know you were ready to start a business? Was this something someone told you to do? And if so, did they also tell you how to go about running it?*

- *Have others noticed the changes you've started to make? What are their thoughts about this?*

Warmest regards,

David and Margaret

My relationship with Osteo lasted several more months, following more or less the same course. I continued to compose and send letters and at one point, had Will and Sarah draw Osteo (using a symbolic constructivist framework; see Barry, 1996). The last four meetings were conducted without Margaret (who went to work overseas). There were times when I felt the process was nonsensical and impractical; I came close to ending the project more than once. Each time I shared these feelings, both Sarah and Will strongly urged me to continue. They maintained that despite appearances to the contrary (all kinds of divorces had been threatened), they found the work liberating. In fact, many changes did occur over the long run—workloads decreased all around and those I talked to reported feeling a lot happier. Administrative tasks such as accounting and scheduling started running smoothly; yet none of the staff had taken special training. The practice became profitable, and most of the staff were quite optimistic about Osteo's future.

I felt strange about all this; though Sarah and Will said the narrative work had fundamentally changed their practice, it seemed too good to be true. Could these few "artful" stories have helped so much? Maybe this was all some enormous placebo effect, some self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet there was no prophesying, no strategizing, no visioning. No "expert" answers, no advice. Perhaps the changes would have occurred anyway; certainly Will and Sarah cared deeply about their practice and had worked hard to improve it. This brings me to some concluding thoughts and questions.

As suggested earlier, organizational settings present a dilemma around problem selection—which of the many issues should be addressed? Should one go the "80/20" route propounded in business schools (where one asks, "Which 20% of the problems are causing 80% of the grief")? Or use content analysis to identify the most frequently voiced problem? Here, we simply focused on problems that had high levels of self-identification—ones where the clients identified themselves as the problem. We assumed that these problems would be the most debilitating; as White & Epston (1990) have argued, when clients feel they are the problem, they remain trapped and immobilized. Taking this approach, narrativist change agents might listen for "We Are" phrases— "We are too conservative . . . We are bogged down." These might be thought of as identity statements, ones where clients' sense of self is somehow at issue.

Related to the problem identification dilemma is the question of who should be "in" on the storytelling process; how wide should the net be cast? That work we did with Osteo reflected a kind of "Little Big" model of influence—a belief that, although few in number, key decision makers tend to greatly affect how organizations operate. This perspective assumes that the dynamics present in top management groups levels are mirrored in the larger organization. Consequently, most of our time was spent with Will and Sarah. A more egalitarian approach might have involved forming "story groups" or "problem leagues" (a term coined by David Epston— personal communication) comprised of people from different functional groups. These groups might use some of the same methods adopted above (in Epston's leagues, members not only listen to one anothers' stories, they also write letters of support).

As I used this approach, I was struck by how piecemeal organizational stories are— especially problem saturated ones. Reflecting Boje's (1991) findings, I rarely encountered a whole, intact story. Rather, I discovered story bits and pieces—a partly developed character here, a plot twist there. I suspect that narrative therapy's emphasis on more complete tellings is particularly helpful in organizations where "terse tellings" are the norm (Boje, 1991); expanded tellings can offer those "lost in the trees" ways of seeing the forest (and perhaps other more attractive landscapes).

I have also become aware that this approach has little to do with solving problems (at least not directly); rather, it is about changing the relationships people have with their problems. Problem solving is supplanted by problem dissolving, solutions by dissolutions. As a problem becomes more externalized and less tied to self-identity, a lot of energy gets freed up, energy which goes in unpredictable, but often positive ways. I noticed that as Will and Sarah grappled with Administrative Angst and Overwork, many other problems shifted and dissolved as well.

A question arose for me about the value of different forms of representation. According to Sarah and Will, Margaret's drawings had a pronounced catalytic effect; whereas the questions I raised (both in person and in the letters) sometimes formed an unmemorable blur, the "wishing well" and "cookie cutter" portraits became vivid discussion anchors. These images had a way of pushing Osteo into liminal space. For change to occur, it appears that *nonroutine* representation is helpful—as Bateson (1972: 453) argued, making a difference does indeed make a difference. Yet, there is also the idea of the "appropriately unusual" (cf. Anderson, 1995: 15-16).

If a representation is too unusual (or not unusual enough), it will go unnoticed. Finding appropriate levels of difference clearly requires contextualization and experimentation (e.g., photolab technicians might find photo representation less engaging than those toiling at an assembly plant would). A related point centers on who should be doing the representing—the client, the change agent, or both? Would the visual (and metaphorizing) work have had more impact if it had come from Will and Sarah? Though each of these issues have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Barry, 1996), more study is needed in the area of who creates what.

Others have raised the question of how the genre concept might be applied to organizational narratives (cf. Barry, 1997; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996); I feel it applies here as well. Many narrative therapists work within what David Epston (personal communication) calls a "valorizing" genre, where the client/protagonist achieves self worth through successfully battling a problem/antagonist. Though it is doubtful whether a tragic approach would be all that helpful, perhaps comedic or satirical styles are worth exploring. Within a comedic genre for instance, the problem/antagonist might be engaged more playfully and with less reverence. Greater consideration might also be given to character development in change narratives (an area of great import in literary narrative theory): do some characterizations work better than others? When are mimetic characterizations preferable to metaphoric ones?

Returning to the more fundamental question raised at the onset of the Osteo project—"Can the work of narrative therapy be usefully applied to organizational change management?"—I am inclined to say "yes." Given that the narrative approach works particularly well with individuals and small groups, I imagine it would also prove effective with organizational focus groups; these might be run simultaneously or serially, with each group's story serving to inform other groups' work.

A different approach might involve modifying survey feedback methods to incorporate a narrative perspective—externalizing questions around organizational concerns might be broadly circulated; collected answers could then be used to formulate a round of questions about unique outcomes. Letter writing might be used with virtual organizations or in situations where organizational members must work at a distance; my experiences with Osteo suggest that a surprising number of changes can be effected through the mail. Others have begun applying narrative approaches to organizational skills training and mediation (cf. Monk et. al., 1997); the limitations of the narrative approach within organizations still await discovery.

More questions might be raised—many more. However, given the contextually sensitive, hermeneutic nature of the narrative change project, it is probably best if these questions arise through work with other organizations and over time. Questions important for some organizations may seem inconsequential to others. People in tomorrow's organizations might find today's forms of inquiry insulting. Perhaps the reader might be wondering "Can we conclude anything at all just now?" Yes, certainly. My back is better for the work—of this I am sure.

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