

# Complexity, stories and knowing

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## Abstract

In this article, the author argues that storytelling is a biological imperative for human beings, the psychological mechanism by which they can capture the coherent perceptions of an unknowably complex world required for survival. After examining how internal story creation reduces the world's complexity to a state in which people can effectively choose actions, the article explores how acting on such internal stories helps create a spiral of experience, storying, acting and confirmation or contradiction of storying in experience, leading to knowledge. As experience confirms the predictions of storying, a person's knowledge becomes stronger and stronger. Over time, stories evolve from antenarrative (what might have happened) to narrative (what did happen), and then to myth (the nature of reality). The article concludes with some thoughts on the implications of this theory of the relationship between storying and cognition.

## Introduction

The thought shocked me when it first visited me, but I still can't get it to leave: Storytelling is the most important, most uniquely human thing that our species does. More important, even, than procreation, because without stories we would never be able to understand mating rituals, whether at bars, church socials or professional conferences. We experience the events that make up our lives; we remember what happened, not always accurately; we tell others about who, as a consequence of those stories, we are; and we dream – all in stories.

For me, storytelling, *to ourselves as much as to others*, creates an intricate network of stories, knowing, and meaning, as powerful a constraint on our behavior, individually and collectively, as our physical environment, perhaps more so. It is a swirling, dynamic environment, much as Dervin, *et al.*'s (2003) process of sense-making or Boje's (1995) Tamara describe it – the interactions grounded in different people telling different stories about the same events – a process whose products are forged in the inevitable conflict that occurs when people, with their varied functions, desires and experiences, live and work together.

The power of stories in our lives has become the subject of a cross-disciplinary field of study, in some ways a purely social sciences equivalent of complexity studies. Stewart and Cohen (Pratchett, *et al.*, 2002) suggest that the ability to tell stories is the evolutionary tactic that allowed *Homo sapiens* to survive our Neanderthal cousins. Fisher (1987) argues that the world we know is “a set of stories that must be chosen among...” Therapists such as White and Epston (1990) see behavior as the “performance” of a person's “storying” of events in his or her life and therapy as the effort to break the limiting hold of a person's unrecognized dominant story. Anthropologist Michael Agar (2005) even suggests that ethnography is the appropriate methodology for all complexity- oriented social sciences. Not surprisingly, business writers have also examined the role of storytelling in organizations – from the managerialism of Neuhauser (1993) to Czarniawka's (1998) scholarly approach. One of the key distinctions among these business writers is between the modernists, such as Neuhauser or Gabriel (2000), and the postmodernists, such as Dervin or Boje (2001). As the reader will shortly see, I position myself with the postmodernists.

In this essay, I want to take these arguments one step further. For me, storytelling is more fundamental even than the need to make sense of the world of which Weick (1995) and Dervin, *et al.* (2003) speak. I would like to suggest that our human storytelling environment begins with what we might call “pre-conscious,” internal storytelling, *the basic psychological mechanism by which we human beings capture experience and then construct our perceptual worlds*. Storytelling captures that experience by reducing the complexity of events so that people can act on them. Without this reduction, life would be a blur of often-unrelated events, upon which it would be too bewildering to act effectively. That may seem ironic, given that the external environment of storying *is* diverse and conflictual. Yet, as Feyerabend (1993) suggests, the world is much more richly abundant than any of the ideas we can use to explain it. So, if we human beings are to know anything, we must first remove an enormous amount of noise and focus on the information, Bateson's (1979) difference that makes a difference. And I have become confident that the process of internal storying is the vehicle by which human beings achieve this end. Storytelling – or, if you prefer, story creation – is the human survival tool, equivalent to a porcupine's quills or the tigers speed, claws and teeth.

The idea of a story is so important that I shall use it, not just as a noun, but also as a verb. ‘Storying’ – the attempt, not always successful, to reduce the bewildering complexity of the external world to a relatively simple, comprehensible set of events – for me, begins with the fundamental perceptual principle that we depend on to survive. This pre-conscious storying operates as part of an often-self-reinforcing feedback loop that connects the ‘territory’ of the external world with our perceptual ‘maps’ of it. In that feedback loop, we create stories so that we can act upon events. When our actions produce the results predicted in our stories,

we continue to act on these stories until they help us form the behavioral attractors that characterize our personalities, small group dynamics, and cultures. What we ‘know’ – as individuals or in groups, organizations and societies – results from our ability to predict what will happen when we enact our stories. In examining this feedback loop and its context, I want to focus on three issues:

1. How a complexity-based view of the world makes internal storytelling a key human survival mechanism;
2. How the process of storytelling and knowledge generation forms a self-reinforcing feedback loop so powerful that it can lead human beings to kill each other; and
3. Some other implications of this story-oriented theory of knowledge formation.

## Complexity and storytelling

When I was 25, I was furious with my mother and father for ‘parenting’ me so badly. At the time, it was a very satisfying explanation for many of my life problems, but, eventually, I realized how oversimplified it was. After all, if my parents were responsible for *my* difficulties in dealing with life, then *their* parents were responsible for those of my parents; my grandparents’ parents were responsible for their difficulties; and the buck passed on, until I would have to blame my problems on about a tenth of the Jewish population of Central Europe. Moreover, my parents’ behaviors had been strongly shaped by any number of other factors – most notably, their parents’ being immigrants, the Great Depression, and World War II. Other circumstances further shaped my parents – the ideas of Newton and, then, those of Einstein; American Capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; the polio epidemic when I was growing up; and on and on. What had been a satisfying, simple story of my parents ruining my life was becoming a bewilderingly complex tapestry involving millions of people. Add to all this the multiple self-reinforcing feedback loops, which blur the distinction between cause and effect, and I was left with the world conceived in complexity studies – a world where any event can be enmeshed with almost any other event *and* where new, unexpected things are continually emerging.

Given such a world, dominated by interconnection, multiple causality, feedback loops, and emergence, the key challenge *any* complex adaptive system faces is ‘knowing’ what to do to adapt to any situation. In living systems, as Plotkin (1993) puts it, knowledge is “the relationship between the organization of *any* part of a living creature’s body and particular aspects of order in the world outside that creature” (author’s italics). He adds that living things adapt through their knowledge, thereby surviving. In the course of evolution, such adaptive structures have become increasingly varied. Bacteria have proteins that catch passing food molecules and drag them inside. Some flowers mimic the sexual parts of bees so those bees will fertilize them. Multi-cellular organisms eventually developed nervous systems, spinal chords and the brain, from which mind emerged.

Mind and conscious learning distinguish human life. One of their key products is the ability to tell stories, to imagine new futures and change the world so that we can realize such futures. How critical is this ability? Fisher (1987) suggests that human beings are essentially storytellers, *Homo narrans*. Stewart and Cohen argue that the ability to tell the stories was so central to *Homo sapiens*’ evolution that we should be called *Pan narrans*, the storytelling ape (Pratchett, *et al.*, 2002). I agree that this ability to tell stories is mankind’s key survival strategy, but for an additional reason. Stories, it seems to me, enable us to reduce, internally, the complexity of the world around us in order that we may understand it enough to choose appropriate actions in response to what we are experiencing. This reduction of complexity, however, is only internal. As Bahktin (1981) notes, we often incorporate misunderstandings of what others say and do in our storying of events. So, in our interaction with others, our storying of events, whose purpose is to reduce complexity for us, often ends up increasing complexity in our social environment, as in Boje’s (1995) conception of the organization as Tamara, a house where people in different ‘rooms’ story their common experiences differently and must then negotiate a shared reality. To understand this irony, it helps to take a step back and reconsider this wonderful human invention that most of us have experienced since all our lives.

What, then, is a story? First of all, like the models that Holland (1998) discusses, stories enable us to predict what will happen by simplifying the external world and then revising any specific story/ model if its predictions are inaccurate. The storyteller does so by choosing and ordering events for inclusion, putting them in sequence, and indicating cause-and- effect relationships. While this process may be highly self-conscious when performed for others, internal storying is generally *pre-conscious*. Through such choice, the story becomes, as Bateson (1979) put it, a “little knot” of relevance, providing the context with which we create meaning. Similarly, for Kauffman (2000), stories are “how we tell ourselves what happened and its significance.” Thus, stories enable us to reduce the bewildering complexity of the external world to comprehensibility. But stories are *always* reductions, and we can construct apparently incompatible stories from the same events. For Cohen (2003), this ability to create apparently contradictory meanings from the same reality is a central quality of all complex systems. Meaning emerges from the storyteller’s particular choosing and sequencing of events (see Weick, 1995 or Boje, 2001).

Much of the literature on the subject of storytelling – White and Epston (1990) in therapy, for example, or Weick (1995) in

organizations – discusses it in terms of ‘sensemaking’, which Weick defines as structuring events in order to make them sensible. While this may sound like my conception, the internal storying I am talking about is more fundamental psychologically. Human beings, I am convinced, transform events around them into stories unconsciously, *before* the attempt to make sense of them. Such story- ing is, for us, a biological imperative in a confusingly complex world. In Stewart and Cohen’s words, “[o]ur minds are too limited to grasp the world for what it is” (Pratchett, *et al*, 2002). Moreover, we tell stories, not just to make sense of the world, but more importantly to help us *discover the actions we must take in order to survive*. Human beings are born knowing how to suck milk from their mothers’ breasts. However, we have to learn how to gather, grow, or hunt our food; how to bring up our children; how to build our shelters. Stories enable people to perform all these activities essential for survival by distinguishing noise from information and then transforming information into the knowledge they need to survive in a continually changing world. This is the power of storytelling.

What anyone ‘knows’ about any information depends largely on the stories through which that information is processed. For example, the information that the Sun rises on one side of the sky and sets on the other has generated a variety of knowledge. At various times people have known that Apollo drives his chariot across the sky; that the Earth rotates around the Sun; or that the Sun rotates around the Earth, depending on whether they accept the stories of Greek mythology, the Bible, or the Big Bang, respectively. So important is such knowledge – it is, if I’m correct, experienced as a matter of survival – that much of recorded history de scribe s people killing each other over the differences in what they knew from the same information. Whether we consider today’s Palestinians and Israelis, 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestants and Catholics, or 12<sup>th</sup> century Crusaders and Muslims, these people believed that their stories were *identical to the external world* and, as a result, died to defend them.

For me, the reduction inherent in storytelling is fundamental to the way in which human beings transform the unknowable territory of the external world into our familiar perceptual maps. In so doing, storytelling becomes one key element in construction of the feedback loop by which we connect these two worlds (see Baskin, 2003). It is to that feedback loop that I shall now turn.

## The storytelling/knowledge generating spiral

The external ‘real’ world and our internal ‘perceptual’ worlds are deeply interconnected. The details of anyone’s perceptual world are *selectively* taken from the external world. Like other living things, our perception filters out significant amounts of noise (a difference that *doesn’t* make a difference), “skewed toward the features of the world that matter” most to our survival (Clark, 2001). Consider a simple example of personal selectivity – the experience of walking down a street for the hundredth time and seeing a striking detail of architecture that was never perceived, but had in the past been filtered out. Call this ‘not paying attention’, if you choose, but when a person unconsciously judges that detail to be necessary for survival, then he *will* pay attention. In addition, cultural environment strongly shapes the world picture anyone develops, as in the many words Eskimo culture has for our single word ‘snow’. As a result, Stewart and Cohen observe, “our sense organs *do not* show us the real world. They stimulate our brains to produce, to invent if you like, an internal world made of the counters, the Lego set, that each of us has built up as we mature” (Pratchett, *et al*, 2002). The interaction of this created world picture with the external world forms a powerful feedback loop. For instance, Einstein’s articulation of Relativity, a product of his inner, perceptual world, created immense shifts in the external world.

Knowledge, I’ve come to believe, is both a product and part of this feedback loop. Knowing occurs as people interact with the external world, including, of course, each other. In such interactions, people respond on an unconscious level, and if the response creates the desired results, they will repeat that response in similar situations (Powers, 1998, examines this dynamic in depth). Then, they tell themselves stories about their interactions enabling them to explain *what might have happened*. These initial stories are what Boje (2001) calls “antenarrative.” Boje uses this term in a double sense. Antenarrative both precedes a narrative (coherent story) and suggests a ‘bet’ (the ‘ante’ in poker) that such a coherent story will be found. That is, they are tentative attempts to understand; because antenarrative is tentative, the events of such stories are still dynamic and can be restructured. For Boje, “people live in the antenarrative”; in other words, each of us experiences life as the ongoing stories we tell ourselves, without conscious thought, in order to explain what is happening around us.

While Boje’s observation is valid, the human use of storytelling can be envisioned, I believe, more like a feedback loop which occasionally spirals, so that:

- Experience in the external world leads to internal storytelling,
- Storytelling leads to testing the external world as one acts on a story,
- This testing leads to new experiences, which, if they confirm the predictions in the story,
- Produce knowledge reinforcing the storytelling that explains experience.

As this cycle continues, successfully repeating the desired results of an enacted story strengthens the power of that story through three levels. First, experience leads to *antenarrative*, an explanation of *what might have happened*. If action based on this story leads to the predicted results, it produces both tentative knowledge of the situation and confirms the story. At some point, if the results continue predictable, the story becomes fixed as *narrative*, a 'counterfeit coherence' imposed on the multifaceted events from which any story is abstracted (Boje, 2001), a statement of *what did happen*. At this point, new antenarrative tends to be shaped by existing narrative, and people tell stories in which their perceptions reflect what they already know, creating self-fulfilling prophecies. Having been confirmed by experience, the knowledge becomes increasingly reliable. With time and further successful iteration in different situations, the story can become mythic and begin to signify, not merely what happened, but *the nature of reality*. Because it does define the nature of reality, mythic knowledge tends to be the deepest, most powerful form of knowledge. Think, for instance, of the difference in world view and experience of people who believe in the myths of Biblical Creation or the Big Bang. Moreover, as Campbell (1968) points out, *personal* mythology is especially important in Western society, as opposed to the more strongly cultural myths of pre-Western societies.

At the level of myth, storytelling acts much like the attractors of complexity studies. It moves the person who holds any specific set of mythic stories to the limited range of behaviors, of all those possible, that characterize attractors in any system. For any individual, the storytelling attractor results in *personality*. My personality is the way I define my behavioral regularities: Am I honest or dishonest? Am I intellectually quick or slow? Am I sociable or shy? My personality, in short, is what I believe I am, and that is generally expressed in my stories about myself. Describing this process in terms of complexity studies seems especially valuable because individual storytelling exists embedded in a series of more inclusive levels. The mythic stories of a family or small group result in its *dynamics*. Those of an organization or society result in its *culture*. All three of these results of storytelling conform to the life cycle of attractors (Baskin, 2003). The antenarrative phase exhibits the exploratory behavior characteristic of phase transition; narrative demonstrates the discovery of what works, characteristic of early stable state behavior; myth fixes behavior in what has worked, holding systems in those behaviors until they *must* change, the stage of stable state development Salthe (1993) calls "senescence." Because *all* senescent systems are inflexible, personality, family dynamics, and organizational culture are notoriously difficult to change, even when behavior is becoming increasingly selfdestructive, as the attractor's life-cycle approaches its end.

To get a better picture of how this storytelling spiral works, I would like to turn now to a more detailed discussion of antenarrative, narrative, and myth and some examples of how they function in the workplace. I came across the first two in a research study I performed in 2001, with funding from the Institute for the Study of Coherence and Emergence. In this project, I interviewed more than 100 workers in 27 work groups at three American hospitals. In the interviews, I asked participants to tell stories about such subjects as their most notable successes and difficulties, hoping to create a picture of their local group cultures. One of the most interesting findings of this study was the way different groups experienced the same events very differently. For example, one group of nursing coordinators told me the hospital's quality improvement program was insulting and badly implemented. Senior managers, on the other hand, were proud that it had been implemented so successfully. Interestingly, at all three hospitals, people in middle management and higher viewed senior management as doing a competent job in an extremely difficult environment; those below middle management saw senior management as either incompetent or clueless. Each of these cases, where people in different 'rooms' of the organization create different stories, bringing them into conflict, illustrates Boje's (1995) conception of the organization as Tamara. This brings us back to the irony I noted earlier. For, while internal stories function to reduce complexity, once people act, those same stories can increase complexity, as they act on different conceptions of the same events. I have examined this dynamic in some depth elsewhere (Baskin, 2004). And while I focus here primarily on internal storytelling, it's worth keeping in mind because the theoretical construct in this essay suggests one can expect conflict from people with different positions and responsibilities, telling different stories and knowing different things about their shared experiences.

In the following examples, I have generally accepted the stories people told me as authentic expressions of their internal storytelling. I recognize that doing so is not always accurate. Some people will tell the stories that have been socially negotiated even though they don't believe them, in order to manipulate others or win acceptance. The illustrations I use below are ones in which the context convinced me that they were authentic. Although they were undoubtedly colored by their workgroup's socially negotiated interpretations of events, these stories did seem to express the teller's internal stories.

## Antenarrative

At the bottom of the storytelling spiral is ante- narrative, the story told as a still-fluid guess at an explanation for some event. I believe that each of us creates antenarrative subconsciously as a matter of our psychological nature. The specific antenarrative anyone creates will reflect that person's unique experiences, especially those in similar circumstances. Such storytelling is likely to express the person as much or more than the circumstances being storied. For example, when my wife and I first married, we shared a house with a woman who turned out to be clinically paranoid. One night, in taking the garbage out for pick-up the next morning, I scraped our brown, plastic garbage can against the wall in the hall. Our housemate took one look at it and accused me of spreading dog excrement on the wall to irritate her.

One function of antenarrative appears to be to give us suggestions for how to act in any circumstance. Our housemate acted on her story explaining the brown mark on the wall by accusing me of having caused it. This is an extreme example. Nonetheless, it illustrates the dynamic at this point in the storytelling spiral. By acting on one's antenarrative, a person can get feedback on the story so that one has an idea of the story's accuracy. If one finds that the antenarrative is accurate, then the person can act on it again and, if the results are as expected, begin knowing something about the situation. With my housemate, denying her accusation actually confirmed her expectations because she 'knew' that my lying about the brown mark on the wall was evidence that I was 'out to get' her. This story illustrates how antenarrative, growing from personal myth, can generate a self-reinforcing feedback loop by which people can validate the most inaccurate perceptions of the world. It is exactly this kind of internal storytelling that White and Epston (1990) help their patients to deconstruct in therapy.

Much of the storytelling in my research study occurred here, at the bottom of this spiral. For example, my conversations at all three hospitals emphasized the position of powerlessness so many nurses experience, which has helped precipitated current nursing shortages in Great Britain and Holland, as well as in the United States. Partially because of the U.S. legal system, all three hospitals had cultures of blame, where everyone tried to put blame for errors elsewhere. The nurses were usually at the point in the hierarchy where they were responsible enough to be stuck with the blame with no one to whom to pass it on (Baskin, 2003). Many nurses' comments reflected this powerlessness:

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*"Some [doctors] see women as less valuable."*

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*"Some doctors will put us down because we don't bring the hospital cash."*

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*"We get, 'They're not satisfied. You didn't do your job.' But no one thanks us when [the patients] are satisfied."*

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*"No matter how long you've worked here, you get the feeling that you could be replaced."*

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Interestingly, the antenarrative in different groups of nurses suggests how differently they were able to experience this powerlessness. In their ante- narrative, nurses in all three hospitals seemed to be searching out how to respond. In one hospital, a group of nurses voiced the anger at doctors and disappointment at the "indifference" of senior management that other groups of nurses voiced. However, their current manager had helped them find a way to accept and overcome their sense of powerlessness. As one of the group explained:

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*"[Our manager] does things for us. She's allowed us to take ourselves off schedule for weekly meetings. When we asked for a retreat, she said OK. Now we meet once a month, have dinner and drink a lot. It really helps to know that once a month I can vent all I want without repercussions."*

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They seemed to be in the process of finding a way to act in the face of their powerlessness and retain pride in their work. They 'knew' that their manager helped them have some sense of control ( "to take ourselves off schedule"), and with that, they also knew they could continue even in the face of their powerlessness.

## Narrative

At some point, an antenarrative story has been enacted, producing the expected results, often enough that it becomes fixed, and the story ascends to the second level of the storytelling spiral. This shift from antenarrative (*what might have happened*) to narrative (*what did happen*) is subtle, and deciding whether stories are one or the other is subjective. I've come to believe that the distinction is evidenced in the way narrative begins to become self-fulfilling prophecy. In antenarrative, people are searching

for an explanation of what happened. In narrative, they have found that explanation and have begun to tell new antenarratives that confirm their older narrative stories.

At one hospital, for example, I spoke to a group of nurses from three floors of the hospital, whose stories seemed on the verge of turning into narratives of victimhood. A number of factors in addition to the difficulties experienced by other groups of nurses, seemed responsible for this shift, including the weakness of their nurses' union and a lack of leadership from their immediate supervisors. But their comments and, especially, the stories they told made it clear that the sense of victimhood had become the storied context in which they worked. Perhaps the most indicative was one nurse's comment:

*"Everybody has problems about what we do, but no one supports us."*

Other nurses talked about this treatment from doctors, administrators, and nursing supervisors. As one said of doctors,

*"Sometimes I think they're just waiting for us to drop a pen so that they can yell at us."*

One story, in particular, suggested to me that the nurses' stories of victimization were becoming fixed as narrative. The nurse had been discussing how patients sometimes blamed them for the patients' own behavior:

*"One patient came in drunk after rolling over his car. He'd become paralyzed and was suing the hospital. I had to sit through a five-hour deposition with his lawyer, who wanted to make me seem stupid and negligent. It was one of the most upsetting experiences of my life. But no one in management supported me. No thanks. No note of appreciation. Nothing. No one cared."*

Whether this story is antenarrative or narrative may be a subjective judgment. But in the context of the conversation with these nurses, it gave me the feeling that the speaker had negotiated this story with others in the group, more a statement of what had actually happened than a guess. They 'knew' that they had been isolated and victimized so deeply that they were beginning to story other events as tales of victimhood. In this way, narrative seems to represent a deeper level of knowledge than antenarrative. Interestingly, the senior managers in this hospital were surprised to learn how deeply this sense of victimhood had grown.

## Myth

It is difficult to be sure exactly how narrative (*what did happen*) becomes myth (*the way reality works*). I would suggest that two conditions seem necessary. First of all, when a narrative can be enacted in a variety of situations and produce predictable results, it becomes a candidate for mythic stature. Second, the mythic story needs to be emotionally satisfying to the people who accept it. If my theory of storytelling is valid, the transition from narrative to myth is one area well worth research effort. For once a story is accepted as mythic, it appears to produce knowledge that can override any contrary information in the external reality it describes. This mythic power is, I believe, the key reason that a significant majority of those who voted for George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that it had important connections to al-Qaeda, even though both these statements had been largely discounted in a series of recent reports. Similarly, the widespread conviction that global warming is the result of increased human production of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions has become a mythic story that overlooks the uncertainty complexity thinking demands when considering large systems like our world's atmosphere. As the editor in *The man who shot Liberty Valance* notes, when the legend contradicts the facts, "print the legend."

At this point, myth acts like the attractors of complexity science, holding people into a narrow range of behaviors that they know will be successful. The danger here is that the environment may change radically and, whether at the personal or social levels, people become trapped in their mythic attractors. The cultural myths at General Motors, for example, made the company the leader in the world auto industry by the end of the 1920s. By the late 1970s, the market's environment had changed radically. But people in GM remained in the behaviors allowed by their bureaucratic myth, and the company did not change. As a result, it nearly went bankrupt in the early 1990s. Not all myths make the people who hold them so inflexible. Perhaps the most interesting such example is Judaism. From about 1,000 BCE to 70 CE, the Jews' ancestors, the Israelites, lived in Israel, and their lives were guided by their mythic book, the *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The *Torah* established the city of Jerusalem, and especially the Temple, as the center of religious life. When, however, this temple was destroyed and the Israelites dispersed in 70 CE, Judaism was born. To enable people to live in accordance with the *Torah*, even though there was no temple and most Jews lived outside Israel, a tradition of interpreting this mythic book, *midrash*, grew to prominence. So important did *midrash* become, that the fourteen rules for interpreting the *Torah* are listed in the morning prayers orthodox Jews are expected to say every day. For nearly 2,000 years now, Jews have been able to adapt to all sorts of changing situation while remaining true to their essential myth.

Returning to the role of mythic stories in the workplace, none of the stories I heard during my hospital interviews seemed to

have become mythic. There were, in all three of the hospitals where I interviewed, some stories explaining senior management behavior supporting an explanation that these managers were either incompetent or clueless to what was actually going on. At the same time, these stories did not seem to have taken on mythic proportions yet. That may have been because, like most hospitals, these three were undergoing significant changes internally and externally. Mythic stories appear to reflect conditions that are more settled, conditions in which the spiral of storytelling and knowing has gone on for a relatively long time.

I heard one of my favorite examples of a story that had become mythic when I was teaching quality improvement at a cola bottling warehouse about ten years ago. One afternoon, a mechanic with more than 20 years on the job was telling me why he and his coworkers liked their current manager, who'd gotten the group involved with the quality training:

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*“The manager before this one came to us right after his MBA. He thought he knew everything. So he never came down on the floor to talk to us about how we did our jobs. One time, I had this problem and went to talk to him about it. I explained the problem and how we could solve it. He turned to me and said, ‘Thanks for coming in to tell me about this. But workers work and managers think. Go back to your job.’ We got rid of him in six months.”*

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His final sentence, delivered with a smirk, suggested to me that this was a mythic story. The mechanic and his coworkers had processed the information that their new manager was making their jobs more difficult through a series of similar stories and, acting on those stories, were able to get rid of him. What they knew was that they understood the system in which they worked better than the manager and that they could manipulate it more successfully. The story, then, was not so much about what happened, as *the nature of the reality* in which they operated. It was mythic.

## Implications

This discussion of the storytelling/knowledge generating feedback loop is a tentative first effort at understanding this phenomenon. If it is valid, several of its practical implications seem to be worthy of further examination:

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1. My argument suggests that the feedback loop of experience/storytelling/enacting stories/knowledge generation is a biological necessity for the human animal. It is a matter of learning *what one must do to survive*. As such, it seems reasonable to consider the knowledge any individual develops as valid for that person and his/her specific circumstances. At the same time, this knowledge must be partial, shaped and limited both by the cultural context and the storytelling choices of the individual. However, because this process enables people to survive, most people assume that their stories and knowledge reflect *the truth*, rather than the individual or group's truth. The power of these stories to become 'realer' than the realities that they explain can be illustrated in such debates in current American society as those about abortion, gun control, or global warming. People experience each as a matter of personal survival, *whether they are or not*; largely as a result, they hold on to their stories as *the truth*, filtering out any inconveniently contrary information.
2. The cycle of increasing reliability – antenarrative to narrative to myth, along with the increasingly powerful levels of knowledge they generate – is both inevitable and troubling. On one hand, it enables individuals, families/small groups, and cultures to develop those behaviors by which they survive in their environment. At the same time, once stories take on the status of myth (*the nature of reality*), they drive people to become defensive about their knowledge, experiencing disagreement as attack. Moreover, mythic stories enable people to engage in the most disturbing behaviors. The white Southerners who lynched African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Nazis who killed six million Jews and six million other 'undesirables', the Israelis and Palestinians who are killing each other today – all justify their acts with their mythic stories.
3. As a result, wisdom may begin with the recognition that one's stories – and the knowledge they generate – are only one of many possible ways to explain and learn from any events. Those who make this recognition expect others to develop the stories and knowledge that enable them to survive *their* unique positions. In this way, disagreement becomes an invitation to curiosity about *why someone would experience the world differently*, rather than an attack by *someone who refuses to recognize the way things are*. This is a valuable perspective in all areas of life, but especially organizational life, where, for example, managers would expect the people who work for them to develop stories and knowledge that is ap-propriate to those people, rather than identical to their own. In addition, this recognition that any knowledge is partial, because of the limitations of the perspective of the person who has developed it, is more than an invitation to personal humility. It also serves as a warning that anyone who presents him or herself as 'knowing' what to do in any situation – one thinks of consultants such as Michael Hammer with his knowledge that managers *needed* to reengineer their organizations – should immediately be suspect.
4. This approach to the relationship between storytelling and knowledge indicates that organizations and their cultures are significantly more complex than current literature suggests. From a complexity viewpoint, current organizational literature mostly presents organizations as coherent systems operating in market environments and organizational culture as the way these systems learn to behave in those environments (see Baskin, 2004, for a fuller discussion). This paper, however, also presents human social organization as a series of embedded systems – the individual in small groups, and small groups in progressively more inclusive systems. The key factor driving behavior is what these people learn from the stories they tell in order to survive. As a result, an organization and its culture are continually being created and recreated in the process of storytelling and the interactions between people who tell different stories, similar to the approaches of Dervin and Boje. In other words, what people in any organization come to know may be very different from what their senior managers think they should 'know', and the true nature of the organization will reflect both these types of knowledge. This perception could offer a significant opportunity for writers in many fields to explore the full complexity of human social systems.