

Imagining new futures: the simple power of story

by Jan Lee Martin of the Futures Foundation

(5000 words)

Introduction

We are immersed in a world of complex and accelerating change. Every day it becomes harder to deal with that complexity, and more important that we do. Indeed it is essential – not just to anticipate and avoid risks, but also to anticipate and create opportunities. How can a tool as simple as a story be of any use?

This paper discusses the fundamental role of story in living systems, including people, organizations and communities. Examples show how stories can strengthen, heal, teach and inspire at each of these levels. One of the stories dates back 20,000 years, others tell of children and young people already changing the future.

Stories help us to share knowledge, to work together to meet the uncertainties of change. They give us strength and coherence. But stories also create change. They fire the imagination. We create the future through the stories we imagine. How can we create the future – how can we create anything? -- if we can't imagine it first?

And we really, seriously, need to create new stories for the future.

At a workshop at the Millennia 2015 conference in Liege, Belgium in March this year, I am inviting participants to help me seek the simplicity beyond complexity in stories with power to inspire. And I invite people everywhere to do that: to imagine, and to share, the stories that can create new futures for our emerging planetary civilization.

The Futures Foundation exists to explore the future. Its mission is “*inspiring ways to create the future*”. Working with senior futurist colleagues in Australia, I started it in 1996, after a career in corporate communication. So this article combines my experience from those two fields – professional communication and futures studies -- in discussing the power of story, and the way it can help us to create new and better futures.

If we want to change the future, it's a lot easier to do before it happens. Stories make powerful magic to help us do that. We need to imagine and share new stories –

- for people
- for organizations
- for communities, and
- for our emerging planetary civilization.

In this article we shall see how story works at each of those levels, and also how stories teach, stories heal, stories inspire.

Who do we think of when we think about story-tellers? Story-tellers through the ages have often been men – the priests and elders and shamans and bards. Is that why, as far back as we can collectively remember, nearly all of our mythical and cultural heroes have been men? Isn't it time for more women to rise to the challenge, to imagine new stories for the future, create new visions, and share those visions through the power of narrative?

Luckily there is already a lot happening, not all from women.

For children, for example, there's a new generation of wonderfully subversive stories – like *The Paper Bag Princess*, by Robert Munsch. Well, that one's not really new, but it is deliciously subversive. It's a wonderful antidote to the market's endless parade of pink princesses and fabulous fairies and beautiful Barbie dolls. (See panel below.)

Teddy bears are the stuff of stories for children – and not just for children.



This little cartoon from Ashleigh Brilliant is my favourite introduction to audiences. It really is brilliant (and that really is his name!)

On the surface, it is a good joke. And it is a disclaimer... it tells you that I do know some of the things I don't know! But it also tells us a lot of other things. What do you think they might be? What are the lessons of the bear?

The bear's key point is that we are living in a time of rapid change. I think you knew that! But if we dig a bit further into his message we find deeper meanings as well.

We are reminded that past experience has less value than ever before, and that, instead, learning how to deal with change is becoming vitally important. It's important not just so we can anticipate and avoid risks, but also so we can create and enjoy opportunities.

And we are reminded that no one of us can know everything. That, in turn, means we have to share knowledge, to work together. And that means we have to be able to communicate.

There are many powerful ways to communicate, but none is more powerful than the story.

1 The personal power of stories

Stories are fundamental to human existence. They strengthen our lives, says the psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.¹ He and his colleagues have noted that people who, as adults, develop coherent life themes often recall that when they were

¹ *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

very young, their parents told them stories and read from books. But they found that individuals who never focus on any goal, or accept their goals unquestioningly from the society around them, tend not to remember their parents having read or told stories to them as children.

But stories can do more than strengthen: they can heal. Narrative therapy is a new approach in western psychotherapy. Based on the work of an Australian psychologist called Michael White, at the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, it offers specific techniques that sound a little bit like the therapeutic stories of indigenous traditions

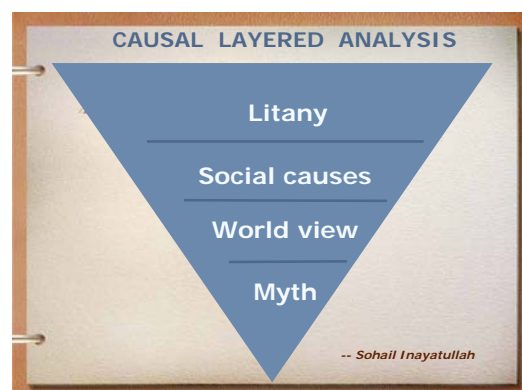
For example, the American Indian healer, Dr Lewis Mehl-Madrona, writes about his work with patients and their stories in a book called *Coyote Wisdom*.² He says telling stories is “a creative act of self, family, and community construction. In a larger sense, stories are a cohesive force in the formation, identity and stability of cultures.

“Communities exist as constructions through shared stories. On the personal level, receptivity to stories allows the individual to access her own inner storyteller and inner healer’ to generate her own healing story. Stories and selves are inseparable.” And he says, “Our lives are shaped or constituted through the stories we and others tell about what we are doing and why we are doing it.”

2 The power of stories in organizations

My background in corporate communication and in futures has given me a special interest in this area, especially in a world where organizations now understand that their most important assets are intangible. How do they develop and protect those assets? Through communication -- and I could talk all day about that! But best of all, through story.

I want to touch on one particular tool that combines the power of futuring and the power of story in a single, revealing process. Developed a few years ago by my eminent colleague, Dr Sohail Inayatullah, it is called Causal Layered Analysis, and it is a practical way to explore depth in the futures discourse. This is what it looks like...



At the top level is the world we see around us... the “litany” level, of observed and reported change occurring in society.

This is where we read the newspapers and watch the television news. It’s where we hear people discussing the things that are happening around them: they are worried about working too hard, or too little; prices are going up; the government is doing something silly; it’s harder to get an appointment with a medical specialist. Everyday occurrences.

² *Coyote Wisdom: the power of story in healing.* Lewis Mehl Madrona, M.D., Ph.D. Bear & Company 2005

If you ask yourself why some of these things are happening, you will find yourself drilling down to explore the patterns and systems that give rise to those visible symptoms of change.... understanding a parking issue as part of a transport system, for example. Drill further and we discover that those patterns and systems themselves arise from our mental models and worldviews. And those in turn are created from the next layer because the way we see the world stems from our cultural mythologies -- the stories we tell ourselves. Sohail could go further, but that will do us for now because it highlights story as the origin of all the phenomena that surround us -- including the kind of futures we *don't* want.

So if we don't like what is appearing on that top level, where will be the most powerful point of intervention? Band-aids up there? Or transforming the way we see the world? And if we want to transform the way we collectively view our world, how do we do it? We create new stories.

One day, Sohail and I were using this tool with senior executives in Sydney. After helping them drill down through layers of understanding about their organization and its environment, Sohail invited them to consider their shared story -- their corporate mythology. One group suggested the Sleeping Beauty, waiting for a fairy prince; another the Ugly Duckling, about to turn into a beautiful swan. But eventually they agreed their story was the Tortoise and the Hare.... the company had been made so streamlined -- so fast and efficient -- that it had left its soul behind. That's rare self-understanding in a corporate environment -- and this learning was achieved (together with a great deal else) in a single one-day workshop. Their choice was also intended to emphasise the tyranny of urgency, the absence of time to reflect.

Learning to change ourselves to meet the changes around us is nothing new: we and our forbears and our companion species have been doing it since the world began. Complex, adaptive systems (like humans, like organisations, like societies) survive because they learn and adapt. The difference now is that we are doing it more consciously, taking a hand in our own conscious evolution.

It is ironical that I should have spent my early life telling corporate stories, and it is only now that I am beginning to understand deeply why that worked so well.

These days I'm interested in those deeper levels... drilling down through my own layers from communication transactions as the superficial exchange of information and data on the top level, to the repeated exchanges that build relationships on the next level, to the values and ethics that support those relationships, to the worldviews and mental models that generate those values and ethics and -- yes -- to the cultural mythologies that.... you know the rest.

3 Stories in community and culture

We should also recognise the fundamental role of communication, not only in human affairs but in all of life. As you know, physicists, evolution biologists and other scientists are turning to the lessons of living systems as a way of generating deeper

insights about the nature of life and the systems that it creates – living systems like organisations and communities.

An early commentator on this topic was Fritjof Capra, whose book, *Hidden Connections*,³ uses these ideas to explain such disparate phenomena as protests against globalisation and the introduction of genetically modified organisms.

“Social networks are first and foremost networks of communications involving symbolic language, cultural constraints, relationships of power, and so on,” he wrote.

And he says the dimension of meaning is crucial to understanding social networks. As communications continue in a social network, they form multiple feedback loops which eventually produce a shared system of beliefs, explanations and values. This creates a context of shared meaning, also known as culture, which is sustained by further communications.

"Culture, then, arises from a network of communications among individuals; and as it emerges, it produces constraints on their actions. The social network also produces a shared body of knowledge – including information, ideas and skills – that shapes the culture’s distinctive way of life in addition to its values and beliefs. Moreover, the culture’s values and beliefs also affect its body of knowledge. They are part of the lens through which we see the world.”

An exciting new book, called *Treading Lightly*, offers another lens, telling a story that dates back more than 20,000 years. Yet its wisdom has dazzled an international professor of knowledge management and has much to teach the Harvard Business College.

Karl-Erik Sveiby, a Finnish professor of knowledge management, had been exploring the management of intangible assets in organizations. On a visit to Australia in 1999 he met Tex Skuthorpe, an indigenous Australian elder, and happened to ask him what was the word for “knowledge” in his language.

“We don’t have a word for it,” said Tex.

Karl-Erik was clearly surprised. So, struggling for words, Tex continued: ‘Our land is our knowledge, we walk on the knowledge, we dwell in the knowledge, we live in our thesaurus, we walk in our Bible every day of our lives. Everything is knowledge. We don’t need a word for knowledge, I guess. Maybe that’s why.’

Of course, Karl-Erik was immediately interested in learning more about all this. He wanted to learn about Tex’s people, the Nhunggabarra people, and over time he became captured by the theme that led to the book: *Australian aboriginal society’s model for sustainability has the longest proven track record on earth.*

³ *The Hidden Connections: Integrating The Biological, Cognitive, And Social Dimensions Of Life Into A Science Of Sustainability*, Fritjof Capra, HarperCollins, 2002

Karl-Erik discovered that the Nhunggabarra had a knowledge-based economy, a society that had proved its sustainability over tens of thousands of years of dramatic events, until the Europeans arrived in 1788. How did they do it?

Well, for the full answer to that you must read the book – and I certainly recommend it. But the short answer is the one I offer you today. They told stories.

And the way those stories were told shows another dimension of the power of story. The stories were layered. They were rich in meaning, meaning that became available to people slowly.

The story of the Crow and the Crane, for example, is about two birds who disagree, and how they punish each other for the disagreement. Young people are expected, as they grow older, to discover the law behind the story, the reasons for that law, and finally how the rule of law can be shared through story.

Here's how Tex tells the story.

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

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

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

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

Now that is a very simple story for children. And it is reinforced by their experience. Crows are black. Cranes do sound like that. But as aboriginal children grow up, and learn the laws of their people, they are expected to find more meaning in these stories. They will find examples of laws like these:

do not impose your view on others.... why did the crane insist on cooking the fish?

In the law of the Nhunggabarra, to impose a view on another person is an abuse of power.

share the knowledge.... individual expertise must never be used for individual benefit – partly because this makes others dependent

with knowledge comes responsibility... an expert is expected to fulfil a role for the whole community, not for himself or herself. Everybody in the community had a major role to fulfil for the whole community.

split the roles... the crane performs three roles in the story: catching, cooking and dividing the catch. This is wrong. Work must be split up to prevent someone from taking ownership of a whole chain of knowledge. Role-splitting involved more people in key activities, forced people to work together, and reduced the risk that someone would have a monopoly on knowledge.

if you break the law you carry the shame... the crow's eyes became white so everyone could see the shame he carries for breaking the law. The crane carries his shame in his voice.

At the next level, the growing children learn about the relationship between the community and the larger environment. Here, to keep it brief, the lessons are...

do not stay in one place... the crane exploits the fish by taking more than he needs
do not deplete the breeding stock... if the crane stayed at one waterhole he would kill all the breeding stock and extinguish the whole species. By depleting one piece of the food chain, you deplete the whole chain.

behave with responsibility towards other communities... the crane was behaving as if he owned the river and the fish, but he did not. He should not have taken more than he needed and threaten the wellbeing of communities downstream.

punish only your own... the crane was punished by the crow, but the crow did not have the right to punish him. No one except your own people has the right to punish you. This law stopped revenge behaviour. No vendetta custom existed in the cultural bloc of the Nhunggabarra and it is unlikely it existed anywhere in aboriginal Australia in pre-European times.

There was also a fourth level that taught spiritual action and psychic skills; it included practice, ceremonies and experiences which gave access to the special esoteric knowledge hidden in the story, including concepts like “travelling in spirit”, which was an accepted form of travel in traditional aboriginal society

Stories like this were told, danced and painted, and the Nhunggabarra people heard and saw them all their lives. But the meanings were never told explicitly by those who knew them. People could gain access to the meanings only through hard intellectual work. The young men and women had to pull out the meanings all by themselves, with minute prompts from the old people.

And in other ways, while their learning may not have involved classrooms, there was no lack of rigour in the indigenous education system. The Nhunggabarra people traditionally sent their young men on a learning journey of some 16 years' duration. They would leave their families at around the age of 14 to begin their journey to learn about the land, the laws, beliefs, stories and religions of their neighbouring 25 communities and return home at the age of about 30 with an experiential education that had equipped them for life, and a network of cultural kin.

There's much, much more from this book that would be worth sharing with you, but we don't have time. Enough to say that we futurists have much to learn from a culture that is more than 20,000 years old.

And so do organizations. Tex and his partner, Anne Morrill, conduct workshops for organizations that translate this wisdom into terms that suit the corporate environment. Here the laws come under the headings of

- knowledge management
- valuing difference
- team building
- consensus decision making, and
- learner driven experience.

There's more information (and more paintings) at www.tuckandee.com.au. The book has its own website: www.treadinglightly.sveiby.com.

I'm reminded of that wonderful quote from the American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes: *"I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."* The Nhunggabarra stories show us the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Our world is incredibly complex, and change is accelerating. It is time to simplify the complexity. How can we do it? Through story. Who will do it? Why not women?

4 Firing the imagination: stories that inspire

We have seen how stories can teach, and how they can heal. But perhaps the most important magic of all is the way in which stories can inspire. They can lead to change – indeed transformation – perhaps more effectively than any other kind of communication.

My husband and I live at Pearl Beach, on the Central Coast of NSW, a beautiful seaside village not far from an area of rapid growth with many social problems. In 2002 we worked with some local high school students to create new visions for that area. We scheduled a series of workshops with leading futurists from Australia and elsewhere, and introduced the students to the future.

On the first day they shuffled in, hands in pockets, heads down. Their words and their body language all said: "Why are you asking us about the future? What can we do about it?"

So we sent them out, two by two, to interview community leaders about their visions for the future.

The students came back transformed. Heads up, eyes alight, they reported back from their interviews with a mix of outrage and self-pity. It seemed nobody had much of a vision about the future – *their* future. Instead, the leaders had told the kids – at great length -- about all the things they had done in the past. But it was very clear that nobody was seriously considering what kind of future these kids would inherit.

So the students created some visions of their own, and presented them back to the community leaders at an event in a local hall. Last year, the City Council ran a futuring project of its own. It only took five years!

Big cities like Chicago are reinventing themselves too. My colleagues and I have worked with the cities of Melbourne and Brisbane and others in Australia. And there are hundreds more around the world.

Program by program, place by place, this is where our emerging planetary civilisation is being imagined and created.

'Let the villages of the future live in our imagination, so that we might one day come to live in them!'

-- Mahatma Gandhi

Many people know the story of Bliss Browne, and her program in the inner city of Chicago which is called, *Imagine Chicago*. Bliss visited Sydney a few years ago, and told us about a program in which illiterate parents from inner city neighbourhoods – often neighbourhoods that have been hostile to each other – are invited to their children's school for a literacy program. From the school, they were taken in buses to local museums.

"Museums are masters of communication," says Bliss. "They take huge amounts of information and organise it into key ideas and objects and connections and questions, which is exactly what textbooks do.

"These parents would view the museum as a rich person's place. They wouldn't have gone there. That's why we bussed them from their local schools." And the visit to the history museum, for example, delivered real magic.

"We had a person in character, in historic costume, address them with a personal narrative about the two weeks it took to travel the last seven miles to Chicago," she explained. "This was a first person narrative. The message was that history is very interesting, and transportation has changed a lot.

"We invited them to think about which five things they could take on the wagon, if they were travelling that way. That was a message about choices.

"We showed them how to read a map, which caused a great deal of excitement. It was a first for many of them. They found their birthplaces, where their parents lived, and so on." The evening encompassed a huge leap in reading competence, from key reading skills to "reading" the museum's exhibits.

And it was all about stories.

In my work for the Futures Foundation over many years I have written dozens of stories about transformations that have occurred because someone imagined a new kind of business or a new kind of future. Most of them are posted at our website.

Some are small, some are huge, but all of them are examples of the way people have changed the future by imagining new stories for themselves, for their communities, or for the world.

About a year ago, for example, I was asked to speak at a conference in Canberra to celebrate some awards for women in rural Australia. Faced with drought and other difficulties, these women were imagining and creating new agri-businesses. They were sending lobsters by mail; breeding seahorses for aquariums; exporting duck eggs to China; promoting the natural medicines of mangosteen fruit; breeding crocodiles for their skin -- and even exporting their private parts to Asia. One woman went to London and knocked on the doors of Savile Row tailors, to show them the quality of the alpaca wool she was breeding.

Soon after that, we heard more inspiring stories at the Waldzell conference, at the Abbey of Melk in Austria -- not just from the featured speakers, Isobel Allende and Paulo Coelho, but also from young people in their twenties or less. The organisers called them Architects of the Future. One of them had co-founded a non-government organization to educate Nigerians about HIV/AIDS; another rode his bicycle from India to Switzerland to raise awareness of leprosy; a young man in East Timor challenged 35 of his country's leaders to envision a new future and a new story for his country; another is training traditional birth attendants in rural Malawi with the aim of reducing the number of stillborn children and maternal mortality.

The world is full of stories of outstanding achievement. These stories are inspiring because they're real life stories. Seeing what others have done can inspire all of us to greater achievement.

5 Imagining new futures: stories about *what might be*

But even more inspiring, perhaps, are the stories about what might be. And this is where I want to invite -- even challenge -- women all over the world, to make their own contribution. And to do it, like a good futurist, as a future history -- looking back from the distant future.

Futures work, as you know, is about exploring the future, understanding some of its dynamics, speculating about its possibilities, and imagining ways to create the kind of future we want -- instead of meekly inheriting a future that someone else has already colonised.

We create the future through the choices we make in the present. And, as my colleague, Dr Richard Slaughter asks, how can we make good choices if we don't know what we are choosing *between*?

Remember, we create new futures by imagining them. And to do that well, we must study the future, as well as the past and the present.

Our simplicity must contain the necessary complexity.

For those who want to know more about futures studies and futuring, here are a few relevant websites: our own is www.futuresfoundation.org.au; there's the World Futures Studies Federation at www.wfsf.org; the World Future Society at www.wfs.org; and Shaping Tomorrow at www.shapingtomorrow.com, and Sohail Inayatullah's website is www.metafuture.org.

**"Some people see things as they are, and say:
why? We dream things as they might be and say,
why not?"**

-- George Bernard Shaw

So... what would you most like to see happening in our world right now? Imagine it has already happened, and your grand-daughter is telling her grand-daughter all about it. What does this story tell? Is it about...

- a **person** who reinvented herself, or healed herself, and helped to change her world?
- an **organization** that changed direction...created a profitable, ethical new business in sustainability or health or learning or....?
- a **community** that created a whole new future... perhaps becoming the world's first happiness, or wellbeing economy?
- or is it a story about the birth of our **planetary society**, a story big enough – and simple enough – to enable a new future for our species and our fellow species on Terra?

Is it about *peace*, and how a global agreement was reached? Is it about environmental *sustainability* and how we achieved it after coming perilously close to planetary annihilation? Is it about the *rich-poor* gap, and how a new generation of young people, globally connected with their peers, overturned the bad habits of the western industrial culture and created new futures?

Is it about *health*, and the way we rediscovered the ancient wisdom of natural health and healing instead of spending the earth's resources on more ways for the rich to postpone death while the poor starve?

Is it about *money*, and the way the collapse of the post-industrial economy forced us into networks and grids of local economies, some of them knowledge-based and others engaged in the local, sustainable, production of essential goods and services?

Is it about *education*, and new ways of helping young people to learn what's most important in their engagement with life, rather than funnelling them into careers in an outdated post-industrial economy?

Is it all of those things and more? Can you, can we, describe in new stories -- for children and for others -- the simplicity beyond complexity that might help to create a better future, a better world?

Sydney, March 2008