# Transcendent storytelling: Abilities for systemic practitioners and their clients

## W. Barnett Pearce

*is a member of the Faculty of the Human & Organisational Development Program, The Fielding Institute, Senior Consultant, Public Dialogue Consortium, and Co-Principal of Pearce Associates*

## Kimberly A. Pearce

*is Professor at De Anza College, Senior Consultant, Public Dialogue Consortium, and Co-Principal of Pearce Associates*

### ABSTRACT

Systemic practice is often described as joining with clients to co-construct new stories. While novelty might be the primary desired characteristic, systemic practitioners have principled preferences for certain kinds of stories. However, these preferences are usually expressed in terms of the content of the new stories. We propose exploring the differences among forms of storytelling. Are some forms of storytelling systemically preferable ways to hear, tell, and live stories? The LUUUTT Model is introduced as a heuristic for joining the grammar of a client; one distinctive feature of this model is the centrality it gives to storytelling. Two stories — that of the development of CMM and of the strange, evolving relationship between Kim Phuc and John Plummer — illustrate four forms of storytelling that we call literalist, symbolic, social constructionist, and transcendent. Transcendent storytelling requires of and confers upon the storyteller a distinctive set of abilities that are consonant with the systemic perspective. This paper calls for an attention to storytelling as part of the work of systemic practitioners, offers some analytical distinctions among these four types of storytelling, and identifies some limits of "social constructionist" storytelling for systemic practice. Finally, we suggest that helping our clients acquire the abilities for transcendent storytelling increases their capacities to co-construct more complex, rich, and productive social worlds. We invite correspondence with others who are working with forms of storytelling.

About 40 years ago, Gregory Bateson introduced himself at one of the Macy Conferences as "an angry man". He was angry, he explained, because he had been exploring patterns of family communication that limit, twist, or distort social worlds and thus the personalities of the children who live in them. About 30 years ago, Abraham Maslow began one of his books by juxtaposing two pictures with a question as a caption. One picture featured a group of babies at play, healthy, unselfconsciously absorbed in their activities and full of promise; the other was of a group of commuters in a subway, with vacant expressions and tired faces, staring into space. The caption read: "What happened?"

In a similar way, we observe patterns of communication in communities, organizations, families, and in politics that are distorted and which distort those who participate in them. We sense the gap between the potential for ways of being human together and the realities we achieve, and see patterns of communication which are institutionalized in families, organizations, and government as a constraining factor. Like Bateson and Maslow, we bring a set of value judgments to this perception and, again like Bateson and Maslow, we are not content to be outraged; we want to do something to improve

the social worlds in which we live. Our focus is on abilities for storytelling; specifically, on the abilities required by and created in transcendent storytelling.

We think that the phrase "joining clients in the co-construction of new stories" is one that most systemic practitioners would accept as a useful description of their work. In this paper, we claim that systemic practitioners usually want to create new stories having certain characteristics, and that it is useful to attend to the form of storytelling as well as the narrative features of the stories told.[1]

As systemic practitioners ourselves and as long-time observers of others, we have noted directional preferences about some of the narrative features of the stories that our clients tell. This preference is not inconsistent with neutrality (or irreverence, curiosity, or the not-knowing position) toward the content of the clients' stories. No definitive list of these new characteristics should be expected, but some hints of these preferences are readily available. New stories should move "from blame and labeling to positive connotation and contextualization, from linearity to circularity" (Seligman, 1997, p. 14); they should be future-oriented, dreaming, imagining, and appreciative (Lang and McAdam, 1997); and they usually feature directional shifts in time, space, causality, interactions, values and telling (Sluzki, 1992). We suspect that any regular reader of this journal could extend this list. These preferences are expressed both during a consultation (e.g., when the consultant reframes the clients' story in this direction) and after a consultation (e.g., if the clients' new story has some of these characteristics, the consultants feel more confident that the client will be able to function better).

But there is another useful way to think about the stories by which we live. In addition to the content (such as, Mrs. Green murdered Colonel Mustard in the Drawing Room with a Candlestick) and narrative features (such as identified above), there are forms of storytelling. Storytelling involves aspects that actors and public speakers call "presence"; it includes rhythms, rhymes and prosody; it involves the energy and amount of "connection" between storyteller and listeners; and perhaps most importantly, it is a part of the relation between the person telling the story and the story told. This last characteristic is sometimes called "congruence" or described as "credibility". We have an additional nuance in mind, which might be called "enmeshment", or the extent and the manner in which the storyteller believes the story, and the story circumscribes the storyteller's world.

The concept of storytelling is hard to describe, and we see ourselves as far from finished thinking about it.[2] However, we think that the abilities of storytelling are familiar and important, even if we have not had a sufficiently developed vocabulary for describing them. For example, systemic trainers have long made judgments about

---

[1] This paper grows out of our own practice and theory. A somewhat different paper that would be rich in different ways would explore the connections between this line of work and various strands of narrative theory, such as Anderson (1997), White (1995), and White and Epston (1990).

[2] For example, CMM has long struggled with the concept of "variable enmeshment" in social systems (Pearce and Cronen, 1980). In the present paper, we introduce the metaphor of the transcendent storyteller as the curator of his/her stories. This is another attempt to express a perspective described as "social eloquence" in Pearce, 1989; "gamemastery" in Pearce, 1994a, and "systemic eloquence" in Oliver, 1996. We encourage further exploration of these ideas in connection with the abilities required in storytelling.

whether a student needs more practice or is ready to see clients. This difference may be described as whether the student is only able to ask circular questions "mechanically", as if from a memorized list, or as a spontaneous way to join the client's grammar. In our own consulting work, we sometimes sense a gap between the content of the clients' new story and their ability to tell it in such a way as to lead them to act creatively into the future. While the words of a new story might be there, we sometimes wonder if the client is appropriately enmeshed. In both instances, the differences have something to do with storytelling.

## Some Reflections on the Manner of Storytelling in CMM

We have acted into the situation of distorted and distorting stories about what it means to live a life and be in relation to others (that's our "review of the literature") by constructing a rather long, complex story of our own. This story is a practical theory called the "coordinated management of meaning" or CMM (Cronen, 1995, pp. 231–232). In the following paragraphs, we call attention to the manner of storytelling — as distinguished from the "content" or narrative features — of the story of CMM.

CMM has always been "told" playfully. To the extent that it is useful to distinguish between "wisdom" and "knowledge", CMM has always been motivated more by a desire for wisdom than a quest for knowledge, animated by questions like, "what does it mean to be a person?" "how can we live better lives?" and "what patterns of communication are most conducive to living with dignity, honor, and joy?" Perhaps wisdom is too important to treat with complete seriousness. Playfulness of manner is one way of acknowledging the "mystery" that makes incomplete all of the answers to questions such as those posed above.

In addition to a formalized deontic logic and quasi-mathematical rule models, the first book-length description of CMM made "wonder" the subject of its first and last chapters (Pearce and Cronen, 1980). Those who read this book closely surely noted the playful incongruity between our seriousness of purpose and silliness in manner when we offered three "theorems" of intentional, extentional, and reflexive wonder!

Pearce (1994a) proposed "Nine Commandments" for helping others. Why nine? Did a failure of imagination forestall "completing" the list? Or is the "missing" tenth commandment an invitation to the reader to take an authorial role? Or was the list of (only) nine part of an intentional self-mockery of anyone who would write "Command-ments" for such purposes? (Note: anyone who thinks that there is a "right" answer to these questions has not understood the point and should start again at the beginning of this section.)

Some of our critics in the academic world have found fulfillment and success by pointing out that the major theoretical terms in CMM do not suffer from excessively precise definitions. The ambiguity of the terms in the titles must mean something. Pearce and Cronen's (1980) subtitle was "creating social realities"; another (Pearce, 1994a) referred to "making social worlds"; and the most recent (Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997) focused on those situations in which "social worlds collide". If these were not vague

enough, Pearce (1989) unabashedly offered a title that set a standard for being either generic or grandiose: *Communication and the Human Condition*. Using terms like these, a storyteller begs to be understood as playing intellectual tiddlywinks with conceptual manhole covers. (Whups, we did it again!). More prosaically, such storytelling deliberately uses clumsy and general words as a way of signaling that the story is to be read symbolically or metaphorically.

This way of telling the story of CMM — playful, ironic, ambiguous — stems neither from artistic choice nor quirks of character, but is forced upon CMM-ers by the nature of the story itself. CMM cannot be fully told, and the most serious (that is, literal) attempt to do so involves naming irreducible tensions.

One set of tensions is between meanings and actions (or stories lived and stories told); another is between coordination and coherence. CMM's claim is that any resolution of these tensions is paralyzing. But those of us who have told the story of CMM have also been strongly influenced by the tensions between the realities of individuals and of social groups, or what is indexed by the hyphens in Harré's (1984, p. 58) felicitous phrase, "persons-in-conversation".

In part because we have been in different professional conversations over the years, we have shifted in the ways that we dealt with this tension. The first phase of the CMM project (up to 1980) focused more on the work of individuals as they construct and live in patterns of communication. Later work has started with the events and objects of our social worlds as they are (re)co-constructed in temporally-extended, unfinished patterns of communication. What we have tried to achieve, and it is difficult indeed, is to tell our story in a way that respects both sides of this tension, each of which reveals something important. For example, taking a more "social" approach usefully shows each of us being born into patterns of communication which we did not choose, as being shaped in our beliefs, attitudes and personality by these patterns, and as component parts of complex social processes which are nonsummative, circular, reflexive, and co-evolutionary. Many helpful things are "found" in this perspective, but it can obscure the ability of individuals to choose whether and how much to be enmeshed in various systems of which they are a part, their differential abilities to transcend the logics of meaning and action in which they are enmeshed, and their abilities to act as purposeful agents of change.[3]

Naming reflexive relations is another way in which we've tried to tell the CMM story literally. The most radical claim in CMM is that the many different **ways of being human** have a **co-evolutionary, mutually causal relation** to the many **forms of communication** which occur. This claim results from combining the systemic move of looking for the patterns which connect the stories we live and tell and the social constructionist move of foregrounding the mundane events of life. One side of this relationship is not particularly novel any more: many research traditions have documented the fact that we communicate differently because we are, individually and as members of various social groups, different from each other. But CMM makes the additional, somewhat more

---

[3] Although we are card-carrying social constructionists, we are concerned that we do not forget the individual in our focus on the social. This point was the intention of Pearce, 1994b.
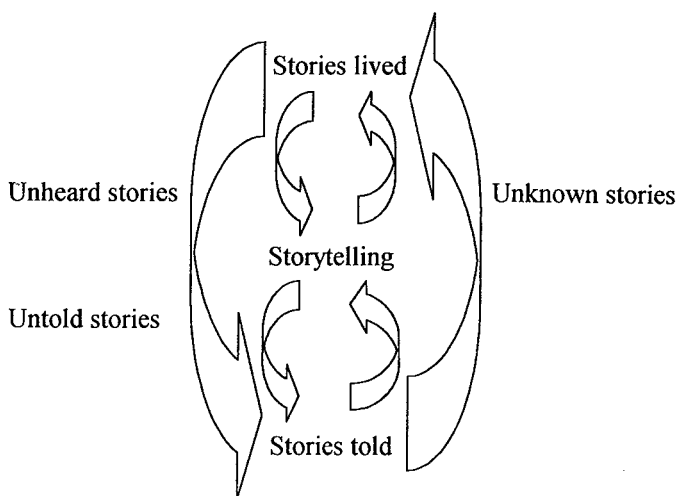
**Figure 1** The LUUUTT Model

controversial claim that we are, individually and as members of various social groups, different because we communicate differently. And yet the real distinctiveness of CMM as a means of trying to improve our social worlds lies beyond a simultaneous affirmation of both sides of this reciprocal relationship. To "do" CMM work consists of entering into patterns of communication as a participant with a commitment to improve them. Ultimately, even naming reflexive relationships fails as a form of storytelling.

## Storytelling in the LUUUTT Model

We have begun to give more explicit attention to the manner in which we and our clients tell their stories. The LUUUTT Model is a heuristic for entering the grammar of our clients. While parts of the model formalize what many systemic practitioners do, a distinctive feature is the extent to which it calls attention to storytelling. LUUUTT is an acronym for 1) stories Lived; 2) Unknown stories; 3) Untold stories; 4) Unheard stories; 5) stories Told; and 6) story Telling.

The concept of the tension between stories **lived** and stories **told** is familiar to many systemic practitioners. Stories lived are the co-constructed patterns of joint-actions that we and others perform; stories told are the explanatory narratives that people use to make sense of stories lived. Although most people feel the need to align stories lived and stories told, they cannot be identical, and the tension between them provides the dynamic for much of our lives. We might say that people live in such a way as to call into being those stories that they love, need, or want, and to prevent the realization of those stories that they hate or fear. It is also true to say that people tell stories in such a way as to make the events of their lives coherent.

But the tension between stories lived and told is not sufficient to guide us to the potential richness of any given communication pattern. In addition, there are **unknown** stories which the participants are not (currently) capable of telling; **untold** stories which

the participants are perfectly capable of telling but have chosen not to (at least, not to some of the others in the situation); and, **unheard** stories which, although they have been told, have not been heard by some important participants in the situation. We suspect that a spiraling evolutionary process works, so that unheard stories become untold stories, and untold stories become, after a while, unknown stories, and vice versa.

The central feature of the model is **storytelling**. Unlike the others, it deals with "how" the stories are told rather than their content, narrative features, or place in the conversational interchanges.

## Storytelling

We believe that stories are the basic technology by which members of the species homo sapiens (as physical entities) become human beings. Although no longer new, this is still a revolutionary idea. For almost two centuries (since the work of Immanuel Kant, 1724–1803), we have known that human perceptions are organized by the structure of the human mind. But Kant thought in terms of static categories; the newer idea is that human beings' experience occurs in stories. Narrative structures, plots, roles, and the like comprise the templates in which we live our lives. That is, whatever worlds we know will have the fundamental structure of stories because that's the way we perceive, think, and live.

Kathryn Morton (1984) described the ubiquity of storytelling: "The first sign that a baby is going to be a human being and not a noisy pet comes when he begins naming the world and demanding the stories that connect its parts. Once he knows the first of these, he will instruct his teddy bear, enforce his worldview on victims in the sandlot, tell himself stories of what he is doing as he plays, and forecast stories of what he will do when he grows up. He will keep track of the actions of others and relate deviation to the person in charge. He will want a story at bedtime.

'Nothing passes but the mind grabs it and looks for a way to fit it into a story, or into a variety of possible scripts: he's late — maybe he was in an accident. Maybe he ran off to Tahiti with a blond. Maybe he stopped on the way here to buy flowers. She will keep writing these 'novels' until he shows up or till she finds one story in which all elements, emotional and circumstantial, blend. Then, whatever he says later, she will know what she 'knows'."

Not only is storytelling ubiquitous, but the quality of life depends on the richness of our stories. "No human society has yet been found in which . . . mythological motifs have not been rehearsed in liturgies; interpreted by seers, poets, theologians, or philosophers; presented in art, magnified in song, and ecstatically experienced in life-empowering visions. Indeed, the chronicle of our species . . . has been not simply an account of the progress of man the tool-maker, but — more tragically — a history of the pouring of blazing visions into the minds of seers and the efforts of earthly communities to incarnate unearthly covenants . . . Man (sic) apparently cannot maintain himself in the universe without belief in some arrangement of the general

inheritance of myth. In fact, the fullness of his life would even seem to stand in a direct ratio to the depth and range not of his rational thought but of his local mythology" (Campbell, 1959, pp. 3–4).

But the "depth and range . . . of . . . local mythology" is a function of the manner of storytelling as well of the content of the stories. Various ways of storytelling can be illustrated in the evolving relationship between Kim Phuc and John Plummer.

In June, 1972, people all over the world were shocked when their newspapers carried a photo of five children running toward the camera, screaming. Nine-year old Kim Phuc — naked, burned, terrified — was in the center of the photo. She was running from her village in Vietnam, on which napalm bombs had been dropped. Clearly visible in the photo behind the children strode three soldiers, carrying weapons.

Like all things whether mundane, tragic or sublime, this image (as Morton might put it) was grabbed by minds and fit into stories. Some "familiar" story-forms would cast Kim Phuc in the role of victim and tell a story of trauma. If this story were lived out, she might have been a life-long user of psychiatric services. Another familiar story-form would cast the teller in the role of hero-avenger, setting him or herself to punish the guilty and prevent a recurrence of the outrageous barbarisms. Hollywood filmmakers have lived well for years off the proceeds of such stories. Yet another familiar story is the morality-tale, in which the teller takes the role of sagacious observer and comments — whether wryly, sadly, or angrily — about politics, human nature, or the tactics of guerrilla warfare. Other stories, some less familiar, can certainly be developed, and this is a fateful process. Whatever story is told and the manner of its telling are parts of the creation of the social worlds in which we all live.

But one aspect of storytelling is that it is never "finished". What some call the "narrative unity" is always challenged by subsequent events. This story is no exception.

In 1996, 24 years after she was bombed and burned by napalm, Kim Phuc participated in a Veteran's Day ceremony at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. She said, in halting English, that if she ever met the pilot who bombed her village, she would urge him to join her in working for world peace. A member of the audience, former Army Captain John Plummer, now a Methodist minister, wrote on a scrap of paper "I am that man". The note was passed to her and moments later they publicly embraced. "I'm sorry", he said, crying; "I forgive you", she replied.

How does this completion/extension of the story fit into your preferred story about the events in 1972? Amuse yourself by telling a story that includes this development as well as the original facts. Now reflect on the manner of your storytelling. Has it changed as you added these events to the story? How would you name these changes? What is opened and what closed by the difference in your storytelling based on the events in 1996?

But life goes on and storytelling is never finished. A cynical reporter (what form of storytelling was he using?) investigated Captain John Plummer's service record and found that he was not and could not have been the pilot that bombed Kim's village. While Plummer was a pilot stationed in Vietnam on the day of the bombing (June 12,

1972), he flew helicopters, not the type of fixed-wing aircraft that bombed Kim Phuc's village. In fact, on that day, he had a staff assignment and did not fly at all. Further investigation reveals that he did not order the strike on Kim Phuc's village, nor was he authorized to do so. We now know that the pilot was Vietnamese, not an American (Bowman, 1997). Now, how shall we tell a story that includes this development? There are at least four possibilities.

### Four Ways of Storytelling

Each of these ways of storytelling require and develop a distinctive set of abilities. Each may be seen as an acquired art. Useful questions to pose throughout this section are: "What are the abilities required for these ways of storytelling?" "Which of these abilities could/should systemic practitioners develop in themselves?" "Could/should systemic practitioners work to inculcate these abilities in their clients?"

1.  The **literalist** way of storytelling is familiar to all of us. It is institutionalized in courts of law and scientific journals; its form is prose; and its spirit is flat. This way of telling stories stresses their adherence to "the facts". Plain, unadorned speech is preferred; anything other than "the facts" is understood as surplus meaning of questionable provenance; and everything is potentially expressible.

    If we tell the story this way, John Plummer's statement that he is the man who dropped the bomb on Kim Phuc's village is a lie, a hoax, or a symptom of a psychiatric disorder. Whichever interpretation, he is to be rebuked, debunked, punished, or "helped".

2.  The **symbolic** way of storytelling is institutionalized in places where the literal style is not. It is the kind of experience we have in theatres, when reading a good book, or when performing meaningful rituals. In these situations, we identify with the events being portrayed using a logic Campbell (1959, pp. 21–22) described as "the lesson of the mask . . . . The mask in a primitive festival is revered and experienced as a veritable apparition of the mythical being that it represents — even though everyone knows that a man made the mask and that a man is wearing it. The one wearing it, furthermore, is identified with the god during the time of the ritual of which the mask is a part. He does not merely represent the god; he *is* the god. The literal fact that the apparition is composed of A, a mask, B, its reference to a mythical being, and C, a man, is dismissed from the mind, and the presentation is allowed to work without correction upon the sentiments of both the beholder and the actor. In other words, there has been a shift of view from the logic of the normal secular sphere, where things are understood to be distinct from one another, to a theatrical or play sphere, where they are accepted for what they are *experienced* as being and the logic is that of "'make believe' — 'as if'".

    Jerome Bruner's (1986) description of good storytelling appeals to a similar logic. Good storytelling, he said, recruits or enlists the reader/hearer "in the

performance of meaning under the guidance of the text". Three mechanisms make for good storytelling, he said, "The first is the triggering of presupposition, the creation of implicit rather than explicit meanings. For with explicitness, the reader's degrees of interpretive freedom are annulled . . . The second is what I shall call subjectification: the depiction of reality not through an omniscient eye that views a timeless reality, but through the filter of consciousness of protagonists in the story . . . The third is multiple perspective: beholding the world not univocally but simultaneously through a set of prisms each of which catches some part of it . . . To be in the subjunctive mode is, then, to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties".

Is this symbolic way of storytelling something to do only after serious work is finished? A literalist-minded colleague of ours relegates much of our work to what she describes as her "weekend reading" category — interesting but not important because not scientific. Or is this "symbolic" way of storytelling basic to the human condition, with literal-mindedness a special and unusual variation? Wheelwright (1954, p. 30) is one who believes that symbolic storytelling is basic: "There is no more ironic illusion than to suppose that one has escaped from illusions. So subtly do the real and the illusory interpenetrate that their difference is never finally clear. Mind is by nature a meddler, and there are no self-evident criteria by which to discriminate its insights from its commentaries". Wheelwright bases his claim on the nature of consciousness: "Indeed, the intimation of a something more, a beyond the horizon, belongs to the very nature of consciousness. To be conscious is not simply a fact or event like those determinant facts and events which make up our physical world . . . To be conscious is not just to be; it is to mean, to intend, to point beyond oneself, to testify that some kind of beyond exists, and to be ever on the verge of entering it . . ." (p. 8). Ursala Le Guin's (1976) serious call for adults to read the literary genre of fantasy presumes a comfortable ability for symbolic storytelling. "Those who refuse to listen to dragons", she warned, "are probably doomed to spend their lives acting out the nightmares of politicians. We like to think we live in daylight, but half the world is always dark; and fantasy, like poetry, speaks the language of the night".

Told with a symbolic sensibility, the story of John Plummer's scribbling "I am that man!" and apologizing to Kim Phuc is transparently clear. He identified himself with the war of which he was a part, although he did not take part in this specific event. In an interview with the literal reporter who accused him of perpetrating a "hoax", Plummer said, "Every time I saw that picture, I said, 'I did that. I'm responsible'." Asked why he wrote "I am that man" on the note, Plummer told the interviewer, "I felt tremendous remorse that a little girl was hurt in something I was involved in, remote as it may be . . . I still feel the connection to what happened there — because I was involved in the process" (Bowman, 1997).

The fact that Plummer's symbolic logic was invisible and incomprehensible to the reporter does not deny it as "true". In fact, it might well be heard as a more profound truth than the literal statement that "I was the person who dropped the bomb". By one definition, a myth is a story that is a lie on the outside but true on the inside. (Please do not read "inside" and "outside" literally!) Someone once said that there are small truths and large truths, and you can tell the difference by looking at their opposites. The opposite of a small truth is a falsehood, but the opposite of a large truth is another large truth. (If you read "truth" in the preceding statement literally, you must return to the beginning of the section and try again!) There is more than a whiff of paradox in symbolic storytelling, and one definition of a paradox claims that it is a truth standing on its head to get attention (Falletta, 1983, p. xviii). As Campbell (1959, p. 12) said, "Clearly, mythology is no toy for children. Nor is it a matter of archaic, merely scholarly concern, of no moment to modern men of actions. For its symbols (whether in the tangible form of images or in the abstract form of ideas) touch and release the deepest centers of motivation, moving literate and illiterate alike, moving mobs, moving civilizations . . . For surely it is folly to preach to children who will be riding rockets to the moon a morality and cosmology based on concepts of the Good Society and of man's place in nature that were coined before the harnessing of the horse! And the world is now far too small, and men's stake in sanity too great, for any more of those old games of Chosen Folk (whether of Jehovah, Allah, Wotan, Manu, or the Devil) by which tribesmen were sustained against their enemies in the days when the serpent could still talk".

3.  In recent years, systemic practitioners have found the abilities and affordances of **social constructionist** storytelling very attractive. In fact, one impetus for writing this paper came from our interest in comparing symbolic and social constructionist storytelling. We used Joseph Campbell to represent symbolic storytelling (see Larsen and Larsen, 1991; Campbell, 1959, 1962, 1964, 1968) and, for social constructionists, an intellectual composite of the work of Vern Cronen, John Shotter, Ken Gergen, and ourselves (see Pearce, 1992; Cronen and Lang, 1994; Pearce, 1995).

While both symbolic and social constructionist forms of storytelling differ sharply with the literalist, there are some interesting distinctions between them. We envisioned a triangle with literalist, symbolic, and social constructionist storytelling as the points and a cluster of differentiations as each line.

Social constructionist storytelling celebrates the generative power of language. Locating human beings "in" language, it shows how particular linguistic forms and practices and/or specific instances of conjoint behavior create the events and objects of our social worlds. Symbolic storytelling, on the other hand, foregrounds a recognition of the limits of language; these stories are filled with allusions to the ineffable — that which cannot be expressed and of which every attempted description is a misrepresentation (Branham and Pearce, 1978;

Branham, 1980). For example, Wheelwright (1954) claimed that "the nature of reality is intrinsically and ultimately hidden from any finite exploration . . . Reality is ultimately problematical, not contingently so, for to grasp and formulate it, even as a set of questions, is to fragmentize it. The best we can hope to do is catch partisan glimpses . . . If we cannot hope ever to be perfectly right, we can perhaps find both enlightenment and refreshment by changing, from time to time, our ways of being wrong". Recall Campbell's provocative description of earthly communities attempting to incarnate their blazing visions of unearthly realities. In another place but in a similar mood, he said, "The best things cannot be told; the second best are misunderstood. After that comes civilized conversation . . ." (1968, p. 84). We wonder if this saying was an instance of mere civilized conversation or if it were something better — but if it were something better, we have probably misunderstood it!

While not contradictory, symbolic and social constructionist forms of story-telling have very different flavors. One way of describing this difference is to say that symbolic storytelling is more reflexively aware of a nonverbal reality and/or universal themes and takes them more seriously than do social constructionists, who are comfortable staying in the mundane world of empirical events and objects. Following Wittgenstein, social constructionists believe that it is neither necessary nor helpful to look behind or beneath an utterance to understand it; all that is important is there if we will only look closely.

The problematic sites for dramatic developments are another distinction between these forms of storytelling. Symbolic storytelling (particularly in Campbell's versions) focuses on the question of how the individual relates to the nonverbal world and/or to the social group. On the other hand, social constructionist storytelling starts with persons-in-conversations (and particular persons in specific conversations at that) as the fundamental human experience, and thus the ideas of being an individual or of nonverbal reality are the problematic issues.

As Campbell (1968, p. 85) tells the story symbolically, the "collective" mythologies of primitive and traditional societies (both Eastern and Western) "were intended, and commonly functioned, to inculcate belief . . . they determined the form and content of the most profound personal experiences. No one has yet reported of a Buddhist **arhat** surprised by a vision of Christ, or a Christian nun by the Buddha. The image of the vehicle of grace, arriving in vision from untold depths, puts on the guise of the local mythic symbol of the spirit, and as long as such symbols work there can be no quarrel with their retention. They serve no less effectively as guides for the individual than as stays of the social order". However, modern mythology is different in its emphasis on the individual's experience. "Today, more fortunately, it is everywhere the collective mythology itself that is going to pieces, leaving even the non-individual . . . to be a light unto himself. It is true that the madhouses are full; psychoanalysts, millionaires. Yet anyone sensible enough to have looked around

somewhat outside his fallen church will have seen standing everywhere on the cleared, still clearing, world stage a company of mighty individuals: the great order of those who in the past found, and in the present too are finding, in themselves all the guidance needed. The mythologies of this book are the productions, the revelations — the letters in a bottle, set floating on the sea — of such men and women, who have had the courage to be at one in their wanting and their doing, their knowing and their telling" (Campbell, 1968, p. 85).

Social constructionists, on the other hand, are more interested in what happens in specific contexts and in the interactions among people. They focus on relationships, joint-actions, co-constructed entities. They are interested in history — for example, in episodic questioning — rather than the recurrence of eternal themes or the emergence of heroic mythogenic individuals. For them (as for Wittgenstein), "meaning is in use" and, following Dewey, the meaning and value of acts are determined by their consequences.

These distinctions lead to quite different orientations. Symbolic storytelling has something of the sacred about it, even if the particular stories are raucous or violent; it somehow looks through or beyond the story per se to its "real" meaning. Social constructionist storytelling, on the other hand, is fascinated with the mundane. It is curious, irreverent, and takes a "not-knowing" position with respect to situated actions by historical human beings (see, e.g., Stratton and Hanks, 1997). Unlike symbolic storytellers, social constructionists act as if they can — and should — change reality and create new things.

Social constructionist storytelling assumes a radically different cosmology than literalist or symbolic. Apparently substantial events and objects in our social worlds — and we do mean the "big" issues of power, class, race, gender, nations and states, war and peace, economic systems, love and hate, respect and disdain, etc. — are seen as "existing" not as objects in themselves but as local, temporary products of an ongoing, messy, unfinished process of communication. Their "substantiality" disappears and is itself seen as a socially-constructed illusion which constitutes one set of answers to basic human questions, and, in disappearing, opens spaces for many other and some more interesting answers to be given. In the place of "objects", various vortexes of configurations of the on-going process of communication become the center of our attention. Social constructionists focus on the consequentiality of communication, not the existence of objects (Sigman, 1995).

This perspective runs against the grain of ordinary language, tempting communication theorists to wave their arms about wildly when talking about communication, to invent neologisms (such as "logical force") and complicated models (such as "strange loops"), and to employ exotic metaphors. In our continuing search for ways of expressing this systemic, social constructionist perspective, we have taken to using (yet another) of Escher's works. "Bond of Union" (Escher and Locher, 1971, p. 126) shows faces with no substance; that is, the faces consist in the twists and turns of a single spiraling ribbon. Were the

ribbon straightened or tied in another shape, there would be no loss of matter but the faces would no longer exist. This image works for us as a model of the way the process of communication (the ribbon) creates the events and objects of our social worlds (the faces) not by its substance but by its form.

This shift in perspective does not mean that the "facts of life" are not real. Do we social constructionists not bleed and bruise and laugh and cry just as literalists do? But this perspective brings the helpful and hopeful awareness that the "facts of life", as Aristotle said about the subject-matter of praxis, can be other than what they are. We may be stuck **in** a given configuration of communication processes that confers on us an unwanted definition of self or relationship, but we are not necessarily stuck **with** that configuration. If we take the point of view that our personal and social identities and all those things for which we hope and which we fear are constellations of the communication process, this leads to questions such as "who is participating in the social construction of these events and objects?" "how are they being made and re-made?" and "what might we do to bring about those things which are our highest imagining?"

If John Plummer's claim that "I am that man" were read/heard/told/lived in a social constructionist storytelling, we might see it as the "second" move in the conversational triplet (Pearce, 1994, p. 121). That is, to understand the note that he wrote, it is important to see it as a response in a context to a particular act (Kim Phuc's call for the pilot to join her in working for world peace) and as eliciting responses from others. The meaning of an act is not finished when the act is performed, it depends on the way it is moved toward completion by the subsequent acts of others. If others responded literally (as did the journalist covering the story), then Plummer's statement is co-constructed as a lie, hoax or delusion; if others responded symbolically, we co-construct his statement as an identification and acceptance of responsibility; and if others responded as social constructionists, we accept the responsibility for co-constructing his statement and make our choices in terms of the consequences that would be useful.

As it happened, Kim Phuc responded to the news that John Plummer was not, in fact, the pilot of the plane that bombed her village by saying, "I believe in him. I think whatever happened I feel the same way as when we met. He feels so burdened" (Bowman, 1997). How would you describe Plummer's statement "I am that man" as co-constructed in the continuing conversation with Kim Phuc?

4.  We have been engaged in **transcendent** storytelling while telling the story of different ways of storytelling. Recall that we described literal, symbolic and social constructionist forms of storytelling as forming a triangle, and we spent some time differentiating among them. Transcendent storytelling is not so much the fourth corner in a square as the apex that makes the figure a pyramid. Transcendent storytelling can be literal, symbolic, and social constructionist, all at once or alternating among them. Its distinctive characteristics involve the

amount of reflexive awareness and deliberate choice among styles, and of the nature of the teller's enmeshment in the storytelling.

Transcendent storytelling is reflexive. The storyteller is aware of him or herself as a storyteller and makes choices, with more or less insight and ability, among styles of storytelling. This means that the storyteller must have some access to a "trans-systemic" (to use Kegan's, 1994, term) vocabulary that enables him or her to compare various storytelling forms.

Transcendent storytelling has at least three distinctive characteristics. First, it does not allow itself to be bounded by the limitations of any of the other styles. That is, a transcendent storytelling can "use" literal, symbolic, or social constructionist storytelling, but do so with self-awareness and ability to change. This flexibility is not just an artistic preference but is called for by the complexities of social life. In the movie *Il Postino*,[4] a traditional Italian woman discovers a poem given to her daughter by a young man. Unable to read the poem, the mother takes it to her priest, who reads it aloud to her. She quickly fears the worst.

When asked why she is so upset by the poem, she cites the presence of metaphors, and, totally unaware of what she is doing, produces a rich, evocative series of metaphors to denounce the use of metaphors. This story is being told in many ways simultaneously. The poet, Pablo Neruda, knew what he was doing with the metaphorical use of language. The postman was quoting the words — one of the charms of the film is the postman's growing ability to tell stories symbolically rather than literally. The screenwriter and the actress are telling the story transcendently. In all instances, the story is the same, but the way the story is being told and the level of self-consciousness and self-control as a storyteller, differ substantially.

Second, transcendent storytelling at least implies the existence of a vocabulary permitting comparison of different, even incommensurate characteristics of other readings. That is, a transcendent use of social constructionist storytelling can articulate some of the distinctive perspectives and limitations of that form of storytelling, and know when it is better to use literal or symbolic storytelling. In stating this characteristic, we want to be careful not to privilege verbal language (which would carry our social constructionist commitments into our attempt to understand transcendent). This "vocabulary" might consist of the ability to "show" or to "use" different storytelling forms appropriately. For example, we wonder if John Plummer's response to the interviewer did not use both literal and symbolic forms of storytelling. Perhaps he said **both** "On June 12, 1972, I was in my office" **and** "I was the man who dropped the bomb", and understood clearly that these were different forms of storytelling, not a contradiction within literal storytelling. This possibility makes us think of the use of "strange loops"

---

[4] Jennifer Clegg (1998) published a very interesting analysis of this movie from a different perspective. It would be interesting to work out some of the points of convergence and divergence in our mutual appreciation of the film.

as therapeutic interventions (whether in therapy or consultation). What happens when a client is led around the loop that features formal logical contradictions? One idea is that the client is being assisted to develop a different form of storytelling — that which we are here calling "transcendent". The content of the strange loop is not news to the client, but to see the whole **as** a loop invites the client to become more self-reflexive and to develop a sensibility for thinking about how he or she tells his or her story.

Third, transcendental storytelling requires and confers a different person-position in relation to one's own stories (see Pearce, 1994a, for a discussion of person-positions). The teller is simultaneously "in" the story as a "first-person participant" and commenting "on" the story as a "third-person observer". This makes us think about what happens to our clients when we use reflecting teams and circular questioning. Both are ways of moving the client among person positions, and we know that they have powerful effects. One way of describing these effects is to say that they are invitations to the client to a different, more complex form of storytelling. Consider the difference between the statements "I am the man who dropped the bomb" and "The prosecuting attorney who is interviewing me in a courtroom perceives me as the man who dropped the bomb". The statements invoke very different rights, duties, and responsibilities of the people involved in the communication situation, and clearly indicate when a person in John Plummer's situation should shift from symbolic to literal storytelling. The awareness of these differences, and the wisdom about making such shifts, is a part of transcendent storytelling.

Transcendent storytelling requires and develops a set of abilities that are important in contemporary society. Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) studied "moral conflicts" and concluded that transcendent storytelling provides one way in which people who not only disagree but who should continue to disagree can find ways of living and working together. In their summary, transcendent storytelling is "beyond simplicity: philosophical" in that it goes beyond the taken-for-granted and explores assumptions. It is "beyond evaluation: comparative" in that it co-creates a new language in which to see similarities and differences more clearly. It is "beyond obstruction: dialogic" in that it values listening as much as or more than speaking, understanding more than explaining, and respect more than persuasion. It is "beyond blame: critical" in that it carefully assesses the powers and limits of ideas in their contexts; it brings to light the underlying beliefs that would not normally be revealed and explores the contexts in which those beliefs have force (Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997, pp. 212–216).

If Plummer's confession that he was the man were heard transcendently, it would look a lot like what systemic practitioners strive toward: silent, co-present voices would be brought out; differences would be compared appreciatively, and the richness of multiple perspectives would be included. We would explore to whom, in what contexts, and with what consequences Plummer makes his claim;

we would look at what he says in other contexts and how he reconciles them, etc. It would be a rich story, permitting us lots of options about how to co-construct a future. We might even say that we, too, are responsible for dropping napalm bombs on villages and we might accept the responsibility for caring for injured children. And if we did say to John Plummer and Kim Phuc that we, too, are responsible for the horrors of the Vietnam War, a very different conversation would develop than if, for example, we told our story literally by denying our own involvement and labeling Plummer a liar.

## Developing the Abilities for Transcendent Storytelling

In some ways, we think that "transcendent storytelling" is a new name for what systemic practitioners (and teachers of literature, etc.) have been doing for a long time. However, we think that identifying the abilities involved in transcendent storytelling can be a guide to our practice, the training we offer to others, and to our own self-assessments.

We have come to think of two thresholds in the development of the abilities for transcendent storytelling. The first threshold is the ability to discern the difference between one's own stories and those of other people and to live in the tension between telling your own story and being profoundly open to the stories of others. The crucial ability in this threshold involves staying in the tension; resisting the temptation to "resolve" it either by accommodating to or rejecting the other.[5] Among other things, achieving this threshold seems to have something to do with an acceptance of what William James (a hundred years ago) called "the pluralistic universe" and the development of ways of relating to other people that are not predicated on agreeing with them.

The second threshold is that of becoming the "custodian" or "curator" of the stories that one tells and of the patterns of communication in which one participates. The metaphor of "curator" commends itself. Curators of museums or art galleries are very knowledgeable about all the items in a collection, they seek out and add new items to it, and, above all, cherish and care for the collection.

Among other things, becoming the curator of one's own stories seems to have something to do with being aware of the communication process per se, and of accepting at least some responsibility for the content, narrative features, and form of storytelling of one's own stories. There are some interesting connections to be drawn between the concepts of storytelling, interpersonal competence, and eloquence (see footnote 2).

In addition, the ability to tell one's own stories as a curator seems to include a postmodern sensibility that relishes the "U's" in the LUUUTT model — that sees the unknown, untold, and unheard stories as part of the potential richness of the social worlds in which we live. Treating these "U's" both as sites for exploration leading to enrichment and as a continuing reservoir of mystery constitutes a particular aesthetic sensibility that we think is part of the "performance demand" of the contemporary era.

[5] We are drawing on Martin Buber's description of dialogue.

Finally, curators of communication patterns seem to need a co-evolutionary perspective. Patterns of communication are confluences where different stories, lives, and objects come together. Storytelling that does not recognize the coevolution of the stories is too thin to constitute the care of a curator.

How are these abilities developed? Just like any other abilities: by instruction and exhortation (poorly); by imitation and trial and error (better); and by being invited to fill a niche within an on-going group who are already using these abilities (best). The characterization of systemic practice with which we began this essay referred to "joining with clients to co-construct new stories". In this essay, we have suggested expanding this characterization to include joining with clients to co-construct the abilities for transcendent storytelling. In these interactions, systemic practitioners invite and assist clients to tell their stories in a more complex, rich, and productive way than they otherwise could and facilitate the development of their abilities for transcendent storytelling. We look forward to a continuing conversation with systemic practitioners on ways to develop our own and clients' storytelling abilities.

## References

Anderson, H. (1997) *Conversation, language, and possibilities: A postmodern approach to therapy.* Basic Books. New York

Bowman, T. (1997) Vietnam vet's tale called a hoax. *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 18, p. A3.

Branham, R.J. (1980) Ineffability, creativity and communication competence. *Communication Quarterly* **28**, 11–21.

Branham, R.J. & Pearce, W.B. (1978) The ineffable: An examination of the limits of expression and the means of communication. *Communication Yearbook, II*. Transaction Press, New Brunswick, N.J.

Bruner, J. (1986) Quoted by M. White & D. Epson, *Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends*. Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.

Campbell, J. (1959) *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. Viking, New York.

Campbell, J. (1962) *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*. Viking, New York.

Campbell, J. (1964) *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*. Viking, New York.

Campbell, J. (1968) *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*. Viking, New York.

Clegg, J. (1998) Il Postino from structural and systemic perspectives. *Human Systems* **9**, 1, 67–72.

Cronen, V.E. (1995) Practical theory and the tasks ahead for social approaches to communication. Pp. 217–242 in W. Leeds-Hurwitz (ed.) *Social Approaches to Communication.* Guilford, New York.

Cronen, V.E. & Lang, P. (1994) Language and action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in the practice of therapy and consultation. *Human Systems* 5, 5–43.

Cronen, V.E. & Pearce, W.B. (1985) Toward an explanation of how the Milan method works: An invitation to a systemic epistemology and the evolution of family systems. Pp. 69–86 in D. Campbell and R. Draper (eds.) *Applications of systemic Family Therapy: The Milan Approach.* Grune & Stratton, London.

Escher, M.C. & Locher, J.L. (1971). *The World of M. C. Escher.* Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.

Falletta, N. (1983) *The Paradoxicon.* Doubleday & Co., New York.

Harré, R. (1984) *Personal being: A theory for individual psychology.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Kegan, R. (1994) *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Lang, P. & McAdam, E. (1997) Narrative-ating: Future dreams in present living jottings on an honouring theme. *Human Systems* 8, 3–12.

Larsen, S. & Larsen, R. (1991) *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell.* Doubleday Anchor, New York.

Le Guin, U. (1976) Fantasy, like poetry, speaks the language of the night, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle,* November 21 ("World" section).

Morton, K. (1984) *New York Times Book Review,* December 23, page 1.

Oliver, C. (1996). Systemic eloquence. *Human Systems* 7, 247–264.

Pearce, W.B. & Littlejohn, S.W. (1997) *Moral conflict: When social worlds collide.* Sage, Beverly Hills.

Pearce, W.B. (1995) A sailing guide for social constructionists. Pp. 88–113 in W. Leeds-Hurwitz (ed.) *Social Approaches to Communication.* Guilford, New York.

Pearce, W.B. (1994a) *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds.* HarperCollins, New York.

Pearce, W.B. (1994b) Recovering agency. Pp. 34–41 in Stanley Deetz (ed.) *Communication Yearbook* 17. Sage, Beverly Hills.

Pearce, W.B. (1992) A campers' guide to constructionisms. *Human Systems,* 2, 139–162.

Pearce, W.B. (1989) *Communication and the human condition.* Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.

Pearce, W.B. & Cronen, V.E. (1980) *Communication, action, and meaning: The creation of social realities.* Praeger, New York.

Pearce, W.B., Cronen, V.E. & Conklin, R.F. (1979) On what to look at when analyzing communication: A hierarchical model of actors' meanings. *Communication,* 4, 195–221.

Seligman, P. (1977) Sprouts, jigsaws and acorns. *Human Systems* 8, 14–16.

Sigman, S.J. (1995). *The Consequentiality of Communication.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J.

Sluzki, C. (1992) Transformations: A blueprint for narrative changes in therapy. *Family Process* 31, 217–230.

Stratton, P. & Hanks, H. (1997) Reverence for irreverence and the paradox of being liberated by a powerful influence. *Human Systems* 8, 67–71.

Wheelwright, P. (1954) *The burning fountain: A study in the language of symbolism.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington.