The Story of the Hero - Finding Treasures and Making Ideas Work

ECCI-XI paper by Drs Marcel van der Pol, Keridwen, The Netherlands

1. Introduction

Making up stories is one of the oldest ways of getting out-of-the- box. In a story everything is possible. The use of fantasy and imagination can be boundless. On stage actors move around; they act, they interact, they tell a story. While doing that they create a world in minds and hearts of the people in the audience. The storyteller unleashes the creative abilities of his audience just by using words, fantasy and imagination.

Many innovation and creativity techniques focus on people's thinking abilities: solving a problem like a complex jigsaw puzzle. In this paper I will focus on a specific aspect of storytelling: people's ability to roam freely inside their imagination. Solving a complex jigsaw puzzle starts with a defined problem and always ends up within a specific range of solutions, while neglecting useful insights and ideas from outside this range. Exploring fantasy and imagination out of pure curiosity and transforming this search into various stories make innovation and creativity boundlessly.

In this paper I would like to share with you my expertise, my enthusiasm and my experiences as a storyteller, biologist and trainer/coach in the creativity field, both in creating new ideas and in making these ideas come true. I would like to share how storytelling, more specifically the Story of the Hero (based on my book **The Dance of the Hero**®), can help us utilizing fantasy and imagination at best for finding new ideas and making them work.

2. The CPS Paradox

In Creative Problem Solving (CPS) we love to get out-of-the-box, but mostly we are obliged to follow certain procedures in getting out-of-that-box, too. We love to be free minded (and divergent thinkers) but goals (what goals?) got te be realised, problems (what problems?) got to be solved (by convergent thinking).

I remember so well my first experience in the creativity field. As a group we were asked te help solving a problem creatively. I can't remember the method; I do remember the response to an outburst of ideas: this wasn't the right procedure to be creative (I beg your pardon!?). End of session.

A friend of mine has been invited to help a management team to implement creativity and mindfulness. The MT liked their employees to be more centred, more focussed on the meaning of their lives. Did they really like their employees to be more creative, more out-of-the-box? Yes *and* no! Yes, for they are very sincere employers. They want the best for their employees. "Satisfaction", "Innovation" and "Creativity" are important words in their mission statement. No, for they want their employees to be self fulfilled *within* the boundaries of the company. Mindfulness became a (creative) management tool to drive the employees back inside-the-box. Of course I do understand those employers. They really are honest, good willing, responsible people. It's just that the creativity approach (*i.c.* mindfulness) in their way of thinking, beneath the creative surface was a managerial control

innovation. Mindfulness became a charming illustration of the T-Ford doctrine: "any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black".

In a word CPS has become a paradox: structured creativity, planned discovery, out of a small box within a bigger one, confined divergent thinking. Obviously there is a great need for both boundless freedom and confinement at the same time. Why do we love so much to be creative, and out-of-the-box, while at the same time we so often stick to the old rules, to staying within-the-box? Are fantasy and imagination fun as well as so disquieting?

The Story of the Hero utilizes this paradox of confined freedom. An old saying tells us that everybody creates his own (perception of) reality by building his own everyday stories. Maybe two people are confronted with the same facts, the same events, the stories they both will build can diverge profoundly. Building their personal story gives people the opportunity to create meaning and comprehension.
The Story of the Hero studies *how* people create their version of the truth in the stories they tell, and it uses their creating strategies to make change a story easier: change the story, change the paradigm, and make different experiences, insights and ideas possible.

The story of a saint and an outlaw
An illustrative example of this personalized story-making is the ancient Persian story of a Saint and an Outlaw. They meet on the top of a sand-dune somewhere in a large dessert. Right from the start they find out they speak totally different languages. Well, the Saint thinks, perhaps we don't understand each other verbally, body-language is universal, isn't it. The Saint starts with some gesticulations. The Outlaw reacts. A simple sing-language conversation develops. Afterwards both the Saint and the Outlaw go their separate ways. Reunited with their followers at different sides at the bottom of the hill, they are asked to explain what happened on top of the hill. The Saint and the Outlaw start to tell their separate followers their own version of the conversation.
Evidently the Saint doesn't know he just met an Outlaw, and *vice versa,* the Outlaw doesn't know he just met a Saint. Their stories, both interpretations of the conversation, differ totally. In the Persian story the Saint perceives the Outlaw to be a Saint, because he is longing to meet a true saint. The Outlaw perceives the Saint to be an Outlaw, for he is looking out for prey. Since his opponent doesn't show any fear, he believes him to be a more ferocious colleague. In short, both characters perceive the world differently, so they build different stories; they actually experience what they expect to experience.

 The diverse experiences have been modelled by their diverse lead-motives. In storytelling a lead-motive represents the story's main character's (the hero) primary drive. Subsequently the hero's lead-motive reflects (*nolens volens*) the storyteller's own current lead-motive.
A lead-motive decides for the hero what he will perceive, which decisions he'll make, which challenges he'll meet, and where and how he'll finally end up.
The only way for both these story-heroes for understanding the other's version of the meeting is understanding the other's lead-motive. Supposing they agree to do so, the Saint could retell the story like an Outlaw, provided that he is familiar with the Outlaw's lead-motive, and vice versa. Only then they are capable of experiencing the event on the hill as the other one does.

Presuming somebody got stuck in his way of thinking (feeling, acting), for whatever reason. Shouldn't it be nice, if we could invite this person to get acquainted with a not-familiar lead-motive? He at least would experience a different perception of the world (a new paradigm), a different story, and different ways of thinking (feeling, acting).

Storytelling in itself is a paradox, then: the boundless freedom of fantasy, imagination and open-mindedness *and* the preset storyteller's perception of the world, caused by his lead-motive. Nevertheless, lead-motives can be changed: change the lead-motive, change the story. Changing lead-motives is getting out of the box!

3. Creative and Innovative Stories

Making up stories is one of the oldest ways of getting out-of-the- box. Basically within a story everything is possible. In that perspective consider storytelling as one of the best, most creative problem solving techniques. Storytelling provides us maximum freedom in exploring the impossible and solving problems. Everything really is possible in a story. There are no laws that can't be broken, no boundaries that can't be crossed. Storytelling is a kind of dancing from paradigm to paradigm. If you can't solve a problem in one way, just try something else; you are the storyteller. It's your story. If something goes wrong, it's no sweat going back in time and telling it all over again, but differently. By changing events, challenges, characters, storylines, ... whatever.

Still, beneath the surface of every story certain patterns can be found. How does the main character perceive his story-world? What is his paradigm, his looking-glass through which he both filters all the story-input and his own (re)actions? Why does he narrow his experiences to certain events and decisions? How does the storyteller's lead-motive manage his main character?

More creativity can be obtained by understanding (rationally, emotionally and physically) both the freedom of storytelling and story making and the patterns (*p. e.* lead-motive) beneath the surface of the story. How do we get beneath the surface?

Levels of storytelling

The Navaho Indians teach us four levels of storytelling. The first level: Storytelling is fun. Who doesn't like listening to stories around the campfire? There are barely any rules. It's only enjoyment.

The second level: Storytelling as education. Of course on a deeper level almost every story teaches us (in not so many words) the cultural rules. About our membership of society. About what are the core values we live by. About how we are supposed to behave. This is the convergent level, the setting of the mind. Creativity is still allowed, but within certain boundaries.

The third level: Storytelling as healing. That's the beauty of storytelling: it's always possible to retell the story, to change both journey and outcome by setting on in a different mind set.

The fourth level: Storytelling is magic. Storytelling is an art, too. In a good performance the audience's hearts and souls are touched. Listeners are called to set on their own imaginary journeys.

For most consultants, trainers, coaches, etc., it's their job to help people and organizations on the second level. As specialists in Innovation and Creativity we help people and organizations on the third level as well. Something goes wrong? It always is possible to change the story. You are the hero: change your state of mind (your lead-motive) and retell the story! See where that is leading you! We don't ask people and organizations to change their identity, their being; we invite them to explore their own diversity!

As a storyteller and theatre maker I love both the reshaping power of the third level and the magic of the fourth level. In magic everything is possible. Milton H. Erickson was a brilliant hypnotherapist and storyteller. In combining hypnosis and storytelling he seduced people magically to go on an intrapersonal quest. By touching his clients' hearts and souls he evoked their fantasy, imagination; he got them ready to reconsider their current lead-motives and to explore new paradigms.

3. The Very First Stories

We need fantasy and imagination in order to create our stories, to discover new possibilities and alternatives. Similar to the CPS-paradox, the storytelling paradox tells us that we love fantasy and imagination, but, as a rule without realizing it, at the same time we frame our fantasy and imagination by our current lead-motives. Invitations to release this frame are experienced to be frightening. Are too much fantasy and imagination considered to evoke uneasiness and anxiety?

Why and how did we develop this ability to abandon the here-and-now and to roam the past, the future, outside time, everywhere?

Lucy is considered to be man's oldest ancestor. She was an Australopithecus Afarensis, living and dying in the Horn of Africa, 3.4 million years ago. Her footprints are still to be found, captured in volcanic ash. Scientists presume Lucy didn't tell stories the way we do nowadays. Her fantasy and imagination are considered to be very limited (absent?). She probably lived in a small group. Her survival depended on fulfilling her imperative physiological needs through her instincts.

There are scientific indications that the first hominid capable of experiencing shared imagination was the Homo Heidelbergensis (some three million years later). Archeological research found substantial evidence for the Homo Heidelbergensis to be cooperative in complex hunting. Imagine a bunch of H. Heidelbergenses assembling for discussing their hunt of the giant deer. You can't do that on your own. The deer is too great for one hunter. You need your fellow H. Heidelbergenses. Does everyone understand what you're talking about when mentioning a giant deer? What about the different tasks to assign? You do need (some) imagination and shared symbolism to understand, to perform, to work together, to celebrate successes, and share the stories. Maybe it sounds like a small step for those people, in reality it really was a giant leap for mankind.

The Great Dance: a hunter's story

This prehistoric storytelling of the H. Heidelbergensis resonates beautifully in the present-day storytelling of the Koi San. The documentary "The Great Dance: a hunter's story" shows us the timeless hunting skills of these Kalahari bushmen. Imagine the hunter from a hunters' and gatherers' society; man still part of the natural world. He follows his hunger. He perceives the traces. Very carefully he steals upon his prey. If he succeeds, there is enough

food for the days to come. When he fails... more hungry days... even death. There is so much to consider, so many impulses to perceive, to select, to interpret. This hunter tunes in with his surroundings. He knows how to get the best changes to prevail. He has done it so many times. The greatest part of his actions are automatized reflexes. But still he is alert. The interactions between him, his prey and nature are just like a dance: leading, following, planning, and improvising when necessary. That's what he calls the Great Dance of Life. The Great Dance shows us brilliantly how the Koi San are capable of using mature symbolic thinking. A Koi San hunter tries to think, to feel and to act like his potential prey to get the best chance for hunting it down. Listen to his campfire stories after the hunt and his storytelling will reflect his impersonations.

Fantasy, imagination, symbolic communication, storytelling, it's one of the greatest gifts of the human race. Since the H. Heidelbergensis we are capable of imagining things, possibilities, opportunities, solutions, scenarios, etc. The sky is the limit.
Even for some there seems to be no limit at all (*p.e.* "The matrix"? "The never-ending story"? Solipsism?). This seeming boundlessness is a little scary, too ("Minority report"? "Twelve monkeys"? Psychosis?). In order to cope with the boundlessness of fantasy and imagination we went looking for rules, frames, laws, structure; in short we went for safety, for security.

5. The Hero's Quests
Today everybody is making and telling stories. In everybody's mind there is a whole personalized universe to be found. Nonetheless we can share stories... to some extend. That even was a problem for the H. Heidelbergenses. Telling stories doesn't mean to be understood completely. At the dawn of mankind they already experienced misunderstandings and misconceptions. One human being telling his story, ignites the creation of numerous slightly different stories in the hearts and minds of his listeners.

Again a need for some structures arises. So stories are categorized. We know that myths are about humanity in respect to a gigantic, a nearly incomprehensible cosmos with many superior entities like gods and goddesses. Legends are about saints and religious topics. Sagas are about heroic adventures. Fairytales are about small persons doing great deeds, overcoming well-nigh impossible challenges. In believing stories more is seemingly possible than meets the eye!

Joseph Campbell helped us to understand the basic structure of stories (from ancient myths to contemporary tales, novels and movies). In one way or the other there always is a beginning, sometimes good, sometimes bad. Then there is a wake up call for the main character (hero, heroine). The call invites the hero to leave his status quo, cross the adventure threshold, go into the world, meet challenges, overcome fear and find his destiny.
Campbell called this basic structure "The hero's journey". Maybe it's more an archetypical process than a basic structure. Everybody recognizes this archetypical hero within. This call for going on a quest. What are you going to do: leaving or staying? Will you go and confront your problem, or will your problem get (to) you?

Why should a hero response to his call anyhow? Why should anyone be willing to go on a quest and solve certain problems? In the creativity field CPS is an important issue. In that perspective the hero's call is an invitation to identify and solve a specific problem. That's what creative heroes are for! Our hero only can accept or decline. When he responses to this call, he accepts the problem. The main focus of the story will be on solving this problem. Numerous storyline-possibilities are cut off. No beating around the bush anymore. No wandering around, unless by applying CPS-methods. Being creative is solving problems, then.

Maybe there is no immediate problem and nevertheless there is a call to be heard. Why shouldn't our hero go on an adventure just because he wants to? Why shouldn't a call touch his longing for exploring the yet unknown world?
Going on a quest for the sake of the quest itself provides the freedom for countless possibilities. A quest without focussing on a problem maximizes the chance for serendipities and happenstances. Isn't that like life itself? Can't we be like the adolescent longing for the world to explore, anymore?

Carol Pearson realised, that nonetheless a basic structure, the hero's characteristics define the story's development as well. As a Jungian psychotherapist she combined Joseph Campbell basic structure and Carl Gustav's Jung archetypes. Every hero changes in the course of his adventures. Experiences, teachings and insights make him a more mature hero on this particular quest; so archetypically speaking he constantly is transforming.

In everyday life we go on quests all time. On each quest we take at least one archetypical hero along, representing our current state of mind. Our hero makes his own decisions. He'll respond to a call, or not. He'll choose which road to follow. He'll decide which event or story-input to accept or to decline. Which challenges he'll react upon, which to ignore. Each hero has his own motives.

In my own The Dance of the Hero® each one of these archetypical heroes represents an archetypical lead-motive: twelve heroes, twelve lead-motives, dyadic classified by six essential themes. Each hero tells his own story, his own perception of reality. (See also: www.thedanceofthehero.com). Which one of your twelve heroes you choose to take along on a quest, influences your story development. If dissatisfied with how the storyline unfolds, go back and fetch another hero. Better still invite a second (a third) hero to come along. Each hero helps you to explore a different paradigm. That's what I call dancing with the heroes.

A young turkey's story
Let me try and explain this by sharing the following Hasidic story:
On his sixth birthday the boy decided he was no longer human anymore. From now on he was a turkey. He ripped his clothes off and naked, arms flipping like wings, he investigated his new life. Obviously his parents didn't like this development very much. They wanted their son back. They tried everything. They consulted a variety the most expensive doctors. Only when an unknown *rebbe* showed the six-year-old how to be both turkey and boy, the parents got the opportunity to get their son back. These parents loved their son very much.

They were sincerely concerned about his welfare. A turkey just didn't fit in their care giving paradigm. Were they able to accept the son *and* the turkey in the boy?

The Story of the Hero is an applied concept of The Dance of the Hero specifically for utilizing stories and lead-motives in innovation and creativity development.

6. Finding Treasures and Making Ideas Work

In my opinion the advantage of The Story of the Hero is the inspiration it creates. Even the seemingly impossible is possible: yes, we can! Even when we are lost we are capable of finding our ways again! However the disadvantage of these heroic stories is that they create frozen mind sets, too.

For finding unexpected ideas go and investigate the archetypical hero, which you know best on your CPS-quests. Swop or invite one of your other archetypical heroes (there are still eleven left). Experience your quest as new, every time. Anyhow, I love to hear your stories.

Imagine on your heroic quest you found countless new splendid ideas. An important part of the hero's quest is his homecoming. Look! I am back! This is what I found, what I learned! You want to share your treasures, and nobody is interested. Perhaps worse, they disfigure your new found ideas in order to fit in their own quests. So nothing works.

Making ideas work according to The Story of the Hero-concept begins with accepting that everybody is a hero in his own right. At the same time everybody is both the main character (hero) in his own story as a story-character in someone else's. You can make ideas work by understanding the different archetypical heroes (lead-motives) driving your colleagues, by inviting people to change their stories by waking-up other archetypical heroes.

My last challenge to you my dear readers and listeners, is: go and wake your different heroes within for exploring how your idea's can be realised differently.

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