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## A Car Ride Home

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### Abstract

Storytelling is an often-overlooked tool that invites and engages one to become a participant within an unfolding experience. The stories presented for the graduate course, DYNM 673: Stories in Organizations: Tools for Executive Development were written to show how to use narrative as a vehicle to explore the meaning of an incident and to appreciate divergent points of view. The paper was also written to demonstrate the efficacy of storytelling as a medium for deeper learning and understanding. Because they concern conflict based on differing perceptions, both are organizational challenges that managers face daily. Effective management requires reflection on how competing opinions influence interpretation of a problem and how conflict affects decision making and problem solving. Suggestions for enabling effective reflection are offered through a review of literature, organizational examples, and the use of the opening narrative.

# A CAR RIDE HOME

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Storytelling is an often-overlooked tool that invites and engages one to become a participant within an unfolding experience. The stories presented for the graduate course, DYNM 673: Stories in Organizations: Tools for Executive Development were written to show how to use narrative as a vehicle to explore the meaning of an incident and to appreciate divergent points of view. The paper was also written to demonstrate the efficacy of storytelling as a medium for deeper learning and understanding. Because they concern conflict based on differing perceptions, both are organizational challenges that managers face daily. Effective management requires reflection on how competing opinions influence interpretation of a problem and how conflict affects decision making and problem solving. Suggestions for enabling effective reflection are offered through a review of literature, organizational examples, and the use of the opening narrative.

## Matt's Car Ride Home

"We could always go online and track down some old friends," I say while switching lanes to pass an old man struggling to see over the wheel of his Buick. "There's a web site that gives a person's last address, Anywho.com, or something like that."

After a moment my wife, Kelly, replies, "If I was a stalker this would be the best time to be alive." She doesn't break her gaze out the side window. "I mean, you wouldn't have to hire a private investigator, no knocking door to door asking questions, raising suspicion. Just a simple key stroke." She turns to face me as if offering a challenge.

"Well, I think I can't stand old people," I say, looking in the rearview mirror at the swerving Buick. "I know I shouldn't, but I can't help it. In line at the County Theater or at the bank, it's their odd, strident, hurried manner, demanding attention, that we interpret as vulnerability. I think it's nothing but a great AARP conspiracy. It must be taught at some clandestine early-bird diner meeting that once you hit seventy-five you're entitled to drive slowly, smell like urine, and never be wrong."

"You're projecting again. Everybody's not our neighbor, George," Kelly counters.

"I think I'm going to hell because I can't shake this feeling that they have a moral obligation to stay indoors, drive only during off-peak hours, and buy online because a shopping cart shouldn't be used as combination walker and battering ram. I hate them," I insist.

"No, you just don't like George," she maintains.

"Anyway, what I really was thinking about was just seeing friends from the old neighborhood. I wonder where Bruce and Anne are now?" I say, trying to change the subject back.

Staring back out the window, she eventually answers, "Columbus, Ohio. We got a card last Christmas. Both boys are in high school."

It's been several hours, driving back up I-95 since we dropped our daughter off at college. Now we are official empty nesters, with one a freshman at East Carolina, and the other, our son, a junior at JMU.

"We've done what we were supposed to do, right? Two for two," I say, not expecting and not getting a response. The goodbye for me had been awkward, kind of anticlimactic. After what seemed like twenty trips, crossing streets with carts full of clothes and appliances, waiting for elevators in long lines in the ninety-degree heat and humidity, to reach a tenth-floor dorm room that looked like a minimum security cell, I didn't sense the rhythm of this final farewell. Introductions to a roommate and family had all parties on their toes in a saccharin politeness. I kept thinking I had one more trip to the car to make. I watched my wife say goodbye two different times with equal finality, loss etched quietly across her face.

"She'll be okay." I reassure her. "We're eight hours away, but she can take the train home any time." I dig for change in the cup holder, fingers determining the size of quarters. I make another mental note to get EZ Pass. I slow down and pay the toll, and then accelerate, looking for cars in the side view mirror. Everybody seems to be going the other way, going south, grabbing the last of the summer weekends, bicycles mounted on the backs of cars, their tires spinning aimlessly in the wind, extra and essential toys crammed in plastic turtle storage shells on the roofs.

"She won't though. I mean, for a weekend. She just won't." Her voice is flat with certainty. I don't have energy to argue. She continues, "You know, it's like drinking from a fire hose, but the opposite. We spend

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all these years worrying about everything, not really prepared for anything. Always thinking about bills, and the company they

keep, and grades, and character, and getting to games on time and school on time, lunches packed, clothes picked up, barely catching our breath. It took a long time to learn how to keep our heads above it and then someone shuts the water off.” My instinct is to say nothing.

A song comes on the radio offering respite, floating us back to different places. *Flying me back to Memphis, honey, keep the oven warm. The clouds are clearing and I think we're over the storm.* I was chasing down a Frisbee on 19<sup>th</sup> Street beach in Ocean City, trying to impress a girl reading a paperback book by the water. She was from Somerdale, NJ. I was having a catch with her dad just to meet her. Her family rented the second floor of an older Dutch Colonial just half a block away. The two of us would listen to albums at night on the wraparound porch. We had to keep it low because her dad would watch the ball game in the living room through the screen door. She told me that every America album began with the letter H. I took this as wisdom. When I was working at the corner store, she would pretend to buy something and keep me company. The three weeks went by slowly. I don't remember it raining.

“I think life now becomes episodic,” my wife says as I float back. “You know, things to look forward to. Waiting for phone calls. Preparing for a visit. But we're no longer in the story, more of an audience.” Kelly says this as if coming to conclusions. She stares down at her folded hands; competing thoughts seem to be battling to be heard out loud.

“We should think about getting away next weekend, doing something different,” I point out. “Let's go to the city, hear some music, have drinks at the Tin Angel. It's been awhile.” I say this knowing we won't go.

We pull into our driveway, our development looking the same as we left it. The air in the house is stale; both cats get up

to welcome us or are just reminded to get a drink of water. The sunlight reveals the dust particles in the air in the family room. It's still too hot outside to open the windows for long. My wife adjusts the thermostat and the air conditioning kicks in. “Maybe we can start our search for Bruce and Anne tomorrow,” she says climbing the stairs, her voice trailing behind.

“Okay, maybe tomorrow,” I shout back while opening the back door to take the cats outside.

The late August sun is lower in the sky, casting long shadows on the grass. The sun is still bright, giving everything it touches a glow, like a Maxfield Parrish painting. A cloud of bugs dances under the leaves of the cherry tree.

I talked my best friend into driving me to see her that fall. He had a 1962 Mercury Comet, aquamarine with tail fins and a heater that didn't work. The drive to Somerdale was only an hour, though it seemed longer. Her hair was darker than I remembered. The easy conversations were now stilted. The few hours spent with her friends gawking felt like a petting zoo. The everyday aspect of living lives, inside jokes, and local references were unfamiliar. I remember riding home not sad, but bewildered. It was the first time I had felt tricked by time. It was only sixty days since summer, but it might as well have been six years. Everything had changed.

The cats are waiting at the door, wanting to go back inside. I look around and realize there's a lot of yard work to do, maybe next weekend. Walking back to the house I hear a plane somewhere in the sky. I look up and see the blue flickering of the TV reflecting on our bedroom window.

### **Kelly's Car Ride Home**

“We could always go online and track down some old friends,” my husband, Matt, says, shattering the ceasefire in my head. I had worked hard at achieving an uneasy alliance with warring emotions, providing a comfortable stupor, a protection from pain.

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Now I was back in the front seat on a long trip.

“There’s a web site that gives a person’s last address, Anywho.com, or something like that,” he suggests.

I play along and reply, “If I was a stalker this would be the best time to be alive. I mean, you wouldn’t have to hire a private investigator, no knocking door to door, raising suspicion. Just a simple key stroke.” I wait for a response.

“Well, I think I can’t stand old people,” he says. I recognize the familiar cadence of the conversation. This is his default response to ambivalence. He appreciates the moment and even empathizes, but it’s a concern that treats symptoms only -- that is incapable of understanding the depth of desolation inside. This intentional rant against the elderly is designed to distract.

“You’re projecting again, everybody’s not our neighbor, George,” I dutifully counter. He’s unconvinced. “No, you just don’t like George,” I maintain.

He changes course by asking, “Anyway, what I really was thinking about was just seeing friends from the old neighborhood. I wonder where Bruce and Anne are now?”

There’s not much difference to the scenery along I-95 through North Carolina, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The pine trees all look the same. The same kind I climbed as a kid when needles and sap were in my hair, when I had no fear. I would climb the tallest one in our backyard when we played flashlight tag on summer nights. I’d scurry all the way up to the top to the highest and smallest branch, over the row homes and town houses to get a view of King of Prussia. I would quietly sway in the wind, holding on to something that I knew couldn’t hold me if I fell. I couldn’t see the actual houses or buildings, but I could see the ambient light from shopping malls and strip stores that announced a more important town.

When I squint my eyes, the passing trees become one unbroken green stripe below a sky blue canvas. I don’t know, at least right now, whether seeing friends

would be a balm, or just a band-aid, or the magic elixir that would cure me. “Columbus, Ohio. We got a card last Christmas. Both boys are in high school,” I think I reply.

It’s been several hours, driving back up I-95 since we dropped our daughter off at college. Now we are official empty nesters, with one a freshman at East Carolina, and the other, our son, a junior at JMU.

“We’ve done what we were supposed to do, right? Two for two,” my husband points out. I don’t know how to answer. I didn’t know despair had a taste until today. I resent Kara’s independence while ashamed of my pettiness. I don’t remember being this way at her age, this strong or oblivious. I blame Matt’s side of the family, more a pack of wolves. Actually that’s not right. Wolves are more communal.

The whole day was a slow drip leaking sadness, an unmarked trail from the hotel to the parking lot to the dorm and back again, while I felt forced to put on a facade. Like going through the choreographed motions in some kind of waltz, bowing, curtsying, and smiling at strangers I’ll never see again because that’s the accepted protocol.

“She’ll be okay. We’re eight hours away, but she can take the train home any time,” I hear Matt say from a faraway place. My life’s work I thought would take a lifetime. These two great loves have left me. I try hard to swallow an urge to scream, an entirely unfamiliar panic, almost terror, in my chest. It’s easy for him. His tomorrow hasn’t changed that much from his yesterday. He’ll have his routine of meetings and pressures, travel, successes and failures like always. He’ll be on familiar footing. Tectonic plates are shifting under me.

“She won’t though. I mean for a weekend. She just won’t.” I say this with certainty. “You know, it’s like drinking from a fire hose, but the opposite. We spend all these years worrying about everything, not really prepared for anything. Always thinking about bills, and the company they keep, and grades, and character, and getting to games on time and school on time,

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lunches packed, clothes picked up, barely catching our breath. It took a long time to learn how to keep our heads above it and then someone shuts the water off.”

*Flying me back to Memphis, honey, keep the oven warm. The clouds are clearing and I think we're over the storm.* Here's how I define dilemma. A song from 1975 comes on the radio, and I immediately use it as a hot poker, a reminder of a time with both of the kids when they were so much younger. Here's how it works: “Daisy Jane” is a summer song that reminds me of the shore, which reminds me of countless evenings watching *Whose Line is it Anyway* reruns as a family, laughing at silly improvisations. It could be a cloud in the sky, a bird on a branch, or a honk of a horn -- everything reminds me of them.

“I think life now becomes episodic. You know, things to look forward to. Waiting for phone calls. Preparing for a visit. But we're no longer in the story, more of an audience.” I say this out loud to hear my own voice.

“We should think about getting away next weekend, doing something different,” Matt points out, attempting to apply ointment to invisible cuts. “Let's go to the city, hear some music, have drinks at the Tin Angel. It's been awhile.”

I'm too tired to think or talk.

We pull into our driveway. The development doesn't move a muscle. The sound of crickets has replaced the birds. The air in the house smells like a museum, which seems appropriate. I feel like I've been put on a shelf to collect dust like a Hummel in a curio cabinet, a relic of someone else's childhood.

I adjust the thermostat and the air conditioning kicks in. “Maybe we can start our search for Bruce and Anne tomorrow,” I say climbing the stairs, hoping to sound optimistic. “Okay, maybe tomorrow,” Matt shouts back from downstairs.

Suddenly I understand addicts in those methadone clinics. I think I'm experiencing withdrawal symptoms, finding myself fetal-like on the bed -- just one quick fix, a brief

text or phone call to see how she's doing. I know it's the wrong thing to do, to bother her this quickly, so I fight off the urge. I reach for the remote sitting on the nightstand like a lifeline, a connection to routine. I turn on the food channel as refuge.

## Differing Perspectives

The “Car Ride Home” stories illustrate differing perspectives and demonstrate how the method of narrative/story telling can be used as a medium for deeper learning and to improve understanding. Recognizing that different experiences of the same episode are valid is important, particularly those in the modern, diverse organization. Indeed, it is often very difficult to transcend the certainty of one's point of view in order to entertain or explore alternative arguments (Greco, 2012, private conversation). In conflict resolution, team building, and project leadership, many struggle with an inability to recognize, understand, and validate others' opinions, stated or unstated.

The poet John Keats called this capacity to envision how another sees or feels given realities “negative capability” (Abrams, 1957). It is the ability to empty oneself of one's self and pour another point of view into the void. This willingness to imagine a distinct and even antagonistic orientation as a means to gaining deeper awareness and a better resolution is instructive for all who interact and collaborate in organizations. Bill Torbert (2004) termed an organizational actor capable of this level of thinking complexity the “Strategist.” Torbert wrote

The Strategist is open to the possibility of rethinking and even altering his or her viewpoint and purposes in a situation and helping others to do the same. The Strategist consciously seeks and chooses new ways of framing opportunities, dilemmas, and conflicts that accommodate the

disparities, paradoxes, and fluidity of multiple points of view (p.106).

When leading a team, meeting with a supervisor, or talking to a colleague, for example, taking the time and possessing the intellectual and emotional nimbleness to consider and inhabit their experience of the encounter is an initial important step to the health, and, by extension, the productivity of the encounter (Greco, 2012, private conversation). Myriad conversations occur each day in cubicles, conference rooms, and corner offices. These dialogues represent the everyday pulse, the soundtrack of a company's culture. Imagine the potential for gain by admitting the views of others into one's own thought processes. Imagine the losses and failures when they are not.

There can be obvious and hidden costs of not adopting negative capability as a company practice. In my experience, leaders, particularly at the executive level, are encouraged to present strong points of view, have the courage of their convictions, and anticipate opposing points of view with well-planned counter arguments. This is a winner-take-all, zero-sum game played for resources, prestige, and power. In a hierarchical corporate culture, angular thinking is often labeled indecisive, yet "angular thinking" is what F. Scott Fitzgerald described when he claimed that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function" (as cited by Keidel, 2010, p. 40). This type of divergent consideration, which requires time for reflection, may be misconstrued as hesitation or doubt.

Warren Bennis (1999) referenced Michael Eisner's belief that around the Disney Corporation, a strong point of view was worth eighty IQ points. I don't think Eisner intended this to be a reckless statement; rather, it implies that companies could lose the battle of ideas not to external competition, but to the inability of talented people to be heard over the din of rigged or regimented planning meetings. Gary Hamel (2007) supported this by noting, "The machinery of modern management gets

fractious, opinionated, and free-spirited human beings to conform to standards and rules, but in doing so it squanders prodigious quantities of human imagination and initiative" (p. 8). How can organizations corral all the potential energies and ensure ideal outcomes in an environment that doesn't encourage, internalize, or absorb diversity of opinion in a systemic way? One could argue that diversity initiatives in some organizations are illusory, a well intentioned, but misguided attempt to appear all-inclusive regarding race, creed, and color, while conformity of conduct and conversation is expected.

Hamel also suggested that failing to implement negative capability as a process may threaten institutional longevity. He argued

The real barrier to strategic innovation is more than denial—it's a matrix of deeply held beliefs about the inherent superiority of a business model, beliefs that have been validated by millions of customers, beliefs that have been enshrined in physical infrastructure and operating handbooks; beliefs that have hardened into religious convictions; beliefs that are held so strongly that nonconforming ideas seldom get considered, and when they do rarely get more than grudging support (p. 53).

Companies no longer operating, such as Borders and Blockbuster, that believed past success forecast a sunny future, demonstrate that avoiding obsolescence requires vigilance against corporate complacency. And robust restlessness begins with building the processes that increase the likelihood of opinions and alternate ideas being considered.

### **Story as Medium for Deeper Learning**

The narrative introduction of this paper is designed to enable one to enter a learning environment without preconception or

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foreshadowing, offering an invitation to experience events as an objective observer. Stories can assist one to reach conclusions through description rather than prescription.

One premise of the DYNM 673: Stories in Organizations: Tools for Executive Development graduate course is that people learn effectively and efficiently through storytelling. Brian Boyd (2009) makes a case that we are hardwired for storytelling and listening. He wrote

In answering the question why humans in all societies have such a fascination for art, and for the art of fiction, we can appreciate not only why art began, but also why we feel compelled to tell and listen to stories, why we can understand them so readily, why they are formed as they are, why they treat what they do in human nature, and why they continue to break new ground (p. 3).

Boyd takes a Darwinian approach to human nature and behavior when he asks

Can evolution account even for the one human art with no precedent, the art of fiction? Can it show why, in a world of necessity, we choose to spend so much time caught up in stories that both teller and told know never happened and never will? (p. 2).

His answer is affirmative. The curiosity created by stories and the concept of suspense or drama is an evolutionary advantage in our ability both to convey and understand communication. Unfortunately, organizations tend to distill and dilute the elements of a compelling narrative and replace them with bulleted slides that can both inform and induce sleep apnea. Employees need information, but yearn for an adventure.

Storytelling is a tool that can also be used by leaders as a means to disarm indifference and encourage acceptance

through discovery. If a leader needs others to follow, he or she may motivate them more powerfully through story. Bridges (2009) makes the point as follows:

Purposes are critical to beginnings, but they are rather abstract. They are *ideas* and most people are not ready to throw themselves into a difficult and risky undertaking simply on the basis of an idea. They need something they can see, at least in their imaginations. They need a *picture* of how it will feel to be a participant in it (p. 64).

I believe that organizational leaders should invite us to consider a cause as fully, as experientially as possible, so that individuals and the organization can align values and share a purpose in intent, not just in slogan.

Getting others to follow does necessarily require the presentation of a point that is lucid and rests purely on logic. But gaining understanding and being a catalyst for action are not the same. McKee (2003) contended

The other way to persuade people—and ultimately a much more powerful way—is by uniting an idea with an emotion. The best way to do that is by telling a compelling story. In story, you not only weave a lot of information into the telling, but you also arouse your listener's emotions and energy (p. 6).

The “Car Ride Home” narratives are intended to invite the reader to gain a familiarity, if not intimacy, with the two protagonists and to empathize or at least understand the internal struggles portrayed. When I wrote this paper I was teaching myself to embrace an uncluttered approach to an experience; I was pursuing Keats’ “negative capability” which required letting go of self. I found that it takes time to attain an almost meditative state where I had to imagine the emotion, intellect and ego for

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another. It also takes discipline not to slip into judgment or the defensiveness of a point thinker, whose view is supposed to be the valid one (Keidel, 2010). I am practiced at winning arguments and minimizing opposition through a mix of humor, logic, and persuasiveness, three strands of a DNA that work well. But, I am now realizing there are costs of not adequately entertaining unexpected ideas.

In my position as one who assists in the development of young leaders in sales organizations, I need to be able to act professionally following Torbert's (2004) Strategist action logic and to demonstrate my capacity for negative capability through written and role-play examples. "A Car Ride Home" is an example of my increasing empathy and awareness of the unfamiliar. It is an initial exercise in building the cognitive and emotional

competencies necessary to become the Strategist.

On a personal level, the story did prove eye-opening to a daughter who had defined her mother's loss through the narrow lens of a college freshman. So this awareness or immersion through story became therapeutic, a daughter slipping into the shoes of her mother, a father into those of a mother. While it may have been just one car ride, my wife and our children and I acknowledge we are on our own journeys, ones that are unique, but ones that don't have to be alien. We are on roads that will continue to diverge and intersect, but will be better-understood and appreciated from angles previously unexplored.

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