

**WHY WE TELL STORIES:  
THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY**

by

*Alan Parry*

*We knowers are unknown to ourselves, and for good reason: How can we ever find what we have never looked for? The sad truth is that we remain necessarily strangers to ourselves, we don't understand our own substance, we must mistake ourselves; the axiom, "Each man is farthest from himself will hold for us for all eternity. Of ourselves we are "not knowers."*

*(Nietzsche, 1887/1956, p. 149)*

***Abstract***

*The postmodern era is understood as the "endgame" of a historical experiment in which narrative tradition was abandoned in favor of a metaphor of "Man the Machine." Machines, however, lack intentions, the domain of narrative. Humans, as intentional, are narrative by nature. We become the stories we tell ourselves then believe as the truth. Such stories create a world that is defended because it upholds our identity. Narrative therapy externalizes these stories so that self-healing resources inherent in the soul can speak to us of its neglected longings and make us whole.*

**The narrative psychologist** T.R. Sarbin (1986) proposed that any system of thought and practice is built on a root metaphor, a special instance of human metaphor-making that gives a basis for analogy and a sense of familiarity to novel or newly discovered phenomena. Sarbin

argued that "once a metaphor has done its job of sense making, the metaphoric quality tends to become submerged" (p. 5) and treated as a literal description. It then becomes reified, which "provides the foundation for belief systems that guide action" (p. 5). The dominant root metaphor for modern Western civilization has been the machine. The mechanistic worldview sees all things in nature as the outcome of the transmission of impersonal forces. Such an outlook supports the scientific quest for causes. Psychology, in its quest to be taken seriously as a science, has probably gone farther than most disciplines in its determination to adhere to the mechanistic worldview. Psychotherapy, its upstart offspring, has followed suit, even though its mode of practice is inescapably narrative, the domain that specifically addresses not so much causes as intentions and their vicissitudes. People come to therapists primarily because of the distress occasioned by intentions gone awry, things not turning out the way they had been intended. Because narrative deals uniquely with intentions and the meanings ascribed to events. Sarbin, in fact, proposed it as "potentially a useful root metaphor for psychology and other human sciences" (p. 4).

### ***The Restorying Project***

At the same time that meaning and intentionality were being set aside as inimical to science as the hope of the world, stories were actually assuming a new form in the Western world. The invention of the modern novel, with the writing of *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes [1605, 1615], and the novelization of the theater by William Shakespeare, desacralized the narrative form and made it speak in the voices of everyday life. As the scientific revolution proceeded and began to be applied in society, people continued to read this essentially new literary form and to listen to Shakespeare and his successors. According to the Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1975/1981), the novel, unlike the scientific proposition, spoke in many voices from multiple points of view. It introduced the reader to a world in which "Reality . . . is only one of many possible realities, it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities" (p. 37).

Harold Bloom (1994) argued that serious reading does not improve people or make them

into better human beings, rather books “augment one’s own growing inner self” (p. 30). He credited Shakespeare with virtually inventing the modern psyche by the creation of characters “who see themselves as dramatic characters, aesthetic artifices. They thus become free artists of themselves, which means that they become free to write themselves, to will changes in the self. Overhearing their own speeches and pondering those expressions, they change and go on to contemplate an otherness in the self, or the possibility of such otherness” (p. 70). The possibility of a self changing through its own conscious relation to itself does not appear in Western literature before Shakespeare. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the greatest of all imaginary friendships and each other’s ideal conversationalists, by contrast, “change by listening to each other” (Bloom, p. 134).

The very existence of a person as a narrated identity is a modern invention. It is an *individual* having a conscious, intentional relationship with himself in pursuit of a new ego. The self as its own narrative creation is utterly modern. Shakespeare and Cervantes were not trying to change the world, only to write about people who were changing themselves through listening. Sigmund Freud took this enterprise outside the realm of literature and the self-creating reflections of the solitary reader and attempted to apply it systematically as an autonomous discipline and a social critique.

It was not so much that Freud discovered the unconscious. He was the first to rediscover and apply as a method the power of stories as a method to redirect a life that is lost in fragmentation and incoherence. In his own confusion and curiosity about the sources of his patient’s distress and anxiety he forsook hypnosis and, in effect, simply asked them to tell him their stories. In the listening presence of the psychoanalyst who did not seek to impose a point of view or a moral position and did not blame or criticize, the patient's forgotten and “repressed” stories came back to fill in gaps and override the power of other people’s stories to describe the patient’s experience. By contrast, once the patient could find her voice and describe her experiences with stories, a fragmented and mystifying life became meaningful and believable. To be able to tell one’s own stories in one’s own words makes one, in Richard Rorty’s (1989) words, a poet. Without ever quite acknowledging it, Freud was following in the footsteps of

those two great chroniclers of memory, Nietzsche and Proust, for whom, as Rorty suggested, “there is nothing more important or powerful than self-redescription” (p. 99).

Freud presented himself as a scientist, “by necessity,” he wrote, “and not by vocation. I am really by nature an artist . . . My books, in fact, more resemble works of imagination than treatises on pathology” (Freud, quoted in Hillman, 1983, p. 3). He lived and worked, however, during the high water mark of the Western world’s faith in science as the only sure path to the discovery of truth. As a psychoanalyst and physician, Freud had to buttress his creative genius as a literary artist and his speculative brilliance as a moral philosopher. He tempered his discoveries with the abstract theory and conceptual framework of a would-be scientist, although even here the appeal of his theory, for many, lay in the metaphorical resonance of its concepts, its echoes of Plato, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche and, above all, Shakespeare. The next great leap into an almost exclusively narrative focus was not to occur until the emergence in the early 1960s of transactional analysis (Berne 1964; 1972; Steiner, 1974).

For Berne (1964) problems within and between people were seen in terms of certain stereotypical dramas called games (p. 48) which kept emerging within rather predictable transactional scenarios. These scenarios both exemplified and further confirmed the life script as a survival strategy of a person caught between censorious childhood injunctions and driven by equally self-defeating efforts to escape the fate otherwise decreed by the script. The transactional analysis game describes a stereotyped narrative scenario. When it first came to public attention, the word game probably had considerable imaginative power and the irreverent humor used to describe these transactions was a timely tweak of the nose to the increasingly technical and self-important pretensions of conventional psychiatry and psychoanalysis. It was also a refreshingly depathologizing encouragement of patients to take responsibility for their predicaments.

The term game also referred to ulterior or hidden intentions of the protagonist to gain psychological advantage over the other while insisting on the propriety of his motives. Even an apparent defeat could be experienced as a triumph, and a victory could turn to ashes in the victor’s mouth. These are what made these narrative exchanges into antagonistic theater. The subsequent connection of the more episodic games to the ongoing confirmation of expectations

driving an overall life pattern led, particularly in the work of Claude Steiner (1966; 1971), to the conceptualization of a life script as the story, the plot of which kept being confirmed and advanced in the day-to-day, moment-by-moment game transactions. When, in addition, the psychological acuity found in such transactional analysis concepts as the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968), rackets (English, 1971), drivers (Kahler, 1975) and stamps (Berne, 1972) is thrown in, transactional analysis stands as not only the first but probably still the most complete theoretical and clinical expression of a fully narrative therapy. Even its revision of Freud's threefold division of the human personality into super ego, ego and id in favor of the much more accessible parent, adult and child meant that its theoretical base remained thoroughly narrative. Yet transactional analysis paid a heavy price for its relentless preferences for the language of everyday conversation. It was often discounted as merely another pop psychology and the sophistication and narrative power of its approach was not given the respect it deserved.

### ***Why We Tell Stories***

It is the thesis of this article that consciousness of ourselves is constructed out of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and the world and the stories we come to believe of what others tell us about ourselves. Knight and Doan (1994) put it succinctly when they said that, "the human psyche evolved for the explicit purpose of telling stories to ourselves about ourselves" (p. 9). This capacity probably emerged to enable our distant ancestors to instruct themselves and establish an ongoing representation and reputation of themselves in order to gain status in the group and to receive respect from potential rival or enemies. Daniel Dennett speculated (1991, p. 195) that the development of language gave rise one day to the realization that one could ask oneself for help, just as one would another, and give oneself that same help. A relationship with oneself became possible and evolved into story-telling because it proved to be a decided asset in the highly complex and competitive social circumstances with which our direct early ancestors had increasingly to contend.

Stories are inherently about social interactions and their consequences. When our ancestors wanted to present themselves in the most advantageous manner they did so through ways that would be most likely to persuade and impress the other. To that end they might have

learned to persuade the other by first persuading themselves. They found that they could best convince themselves by telling themselves the stories of which they wished to convince the other. Eventually they must have learned that confidence is also a vital asset in persuading and impressing others, and such confidence would best be achieved by reminding themselves of past accomplishments and by convincing themselves generally of their own best assets. A good story is convincing when it is believable. Once believed it becomes the truth for the listener and the teller alike. It also has the advantage of being able to be fixed in the psyche and recalled on command. By persuading oneself of the truth of certain stories one then sets out to convince the other of their truth. In this process the self-conscious subject, the I, becomes, in effect, the author of the stories about her character or protagonist, the me. The me is the object projected onto the kaleidoscope of images, impressions and sensations that flits across the psyche in every waking and most sleeping moments. Once language was available to describe social scenarios from memory and anticipation we became *homo narratus* (Knight & Doan, 1994). We have become psychological beings who are incapable of not narrating our experiences both to ourselves and each other.

Two of the major evolutionary biologists, Nicholas Humphrey (1976) and Richard Alexander (1989) argue that the complexity and power of human intelligence has far less to do with the struggle for survival in a harsh physical environment than with the intricate complexity of the developing human social environment. Many animals have had harsher struggles and have not developed a massively high intelligence. Humphrey suggested that “the chief role of creative intellect is to hold society together (1976, p. 271). Alexander proposed that a capacity to manage our own consciousness at least partially became essential in the interests of persuading and influencing others. To this end it became important that we ourselves be able to believe the things of which we were trying to convince the other. Thus, a kind of psychological blindness--unconsciousness if you will--was built into the human psyche as a fundamental ingredient of consciousness. I define this as the capacity to have a relationship with oneself and to regard oneself, from an I position as an object, a me to the I. This means that when we use the word me we are talking about our self-image, our narrated identity, the outcome of the stories we keep

repeating to ourselves about ourselves. Such stories, as told repeatedly to the me by the I, pertains to how the I would have others see it is me. Self-image is about social presentation.

Since this image has been created for maximum social advantage it becomes extremely important that it look as good to others as to oneself. In the interests of convincing oneself in order to convince others, one will want to put the best spin or interpretation on one's actions and intentions. If one acts from a treacherous motive, or puts one over on another in an unkind way, it will be in one's interest to convince the other (by convincing oneself) that one acted from the best motives and was justified in so doing. In fact, he may not have succeeded in convincing the other as fully as he has convinced himself of his virtue. No matter, he may have given himself away expressively (tone of voice, facial expression ); moreover the context itself may have undermined his credibility such that he is not believed. In the heat of an argument, for instance, one is apt to say the most terrible things in the most unpleasant way, yet remain unfazed due to the righteousness of one's cause and the virtue of one's image of oneself. Thus, the attempt to convince others by convincing ourselves always retains the potential for giving ourselves away. Unfortunately, so effective are we in convincing ourselves at least as much as others and others that the image we have invented is "the real me" that it becomes exceedingly difficult to realize that this image is only a brilliant disguise.

### ***Feelings as the Gateway to the Narrated Identity***

In all likelihood that we evolved from ancestors who constantly struggled for survival demanded the frequent arousal of strong emotions of excitement and fear. This means that virtually all our strong emotions connected us to graphic scenarios, narratively-organized memories of experiences that remind or warn us of how we dealt with the last big challenge. It is as if memory tells us each time that if we dealt with a given threat more or less successfully before, do it again, if we handled it poorly then don't do it again. This scenario-constructing aspect of memory seems more than any other factor to establish narrative as the fundamental manner in which we humans construct a *world* as a place into which the vicissitudes of our ongoing intentions are expected to fit. It also has resulted in the establishment of an inseparable link between emotions and scenarios. Emotions stir memories which are comprised of the

reconstructed scenarios. Anger in a particular instance, for example, would tend to evoke prior scenarios in which one was angry: "It's just like when . . ." I often ask an angry or a tearful client, "What does that remind you of?" or "There's a story behind your anger (tears). Tell me about it." Such questions never fail to release a flood of stories. Each scenario, in turn, reminds us of other scenarios that make up the stories that comprise a *world* of personal meaning. The thread that links various scenarios into a world of stories is their value in confirming a person's self-image, his identity narrative. It is comprised of the stories a person tells herself to affirm and reaffirm who she is and why she *cannot help* acting and reacting as she does. The stories she tell herself, in short, consist, as all stories do, of constellations of anecdotal answers to her personal and social "why" questions, hence the connection between scenarios or stories and emotions. Thus we interpret "a reality" in narrative form to make sense of an intense emotion. Discrepancies also provoke "why" questions, particularly those that involve defending a beleaguered narrated identity. "I am a good person. Why is this happening to me? I know! It's *her* fault."

Robinson and Hawpe (1986) reminded us that: "Experience does not automatically assume narrative form. Rather, it is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories" (1986, p. 111). Until reflection grasps perhaps a personally cohesive metaphor experiences might not be connected narratively, and a sense of world as some kind of unified sense of meaning may not yet have emerged. Nonetheless, a rather inchoate sense of *world* will have inevitably emerged as scenarios are gathered together by the recollection of experiences that justify the person's sense of narrated identity. Before a reflection upon experience commences a person feels continually at the mercy of people and events, that things just keep happening to her. Such happenings take on a narrative form, just as they do, for instance, in dreams or fantasies. It is as if the narrative ordering of our lives has preceded even our active consciousness. The psyche does it for us. It is an autonomous narrating instrument when it comes to the establishment and maintenance of an narrated identity.

Until we assume intentional authorship of these narrative events our experience tends to be of them happening to us, rather than by our intending them, in a manner similar to how games

are described in transactional analysis parlance. Due to the sense of victimization that arises out of such passivity, it may be more accurate to speak of such proto-narratives as *melodramas*. Things keep on happening *to* the person who, not having reflectively intended, experiences herself as more of an innocent victim than as an agent. It is others who are either heroes or villains or, in the ever pointed language of transactional analysis, rescuers or persecutors (Karpman, 1968). It is only when a person's successions of scenarios are reflectively linked together into a sense of a *life narrative* that she is able to assume agency or, to remain consistent with the narrative root metaphor, authorship of her own story, an *I* directing and lending meaning to the life of a *me* as the main character of a life (Sarbin, 1986). The central goal of a narrative therapy must be the facilitation of a sense of personal authorship or agency concerning the events of one's life. Once a person is able to realize that her life is less a matter of things happening to her and more a matter of her authoring the things that happen the closer she is to becoming an artist of her own life.

### ***Where Do Stories Come From?***

Whenever we describe our interactions to others or to ourselves, we construct these events as narratives, regardless of whether the events were past, present, or future.. According to Barbara Hardy, “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (quoted in MacIntyre, 1984, p. 211). This is because our consciousness evolved primarily to enable us to cope with the increasingly intricate demands placed on our early ancestors by the social worlds they were developing. “The human psyche was destined primarily to solve *social* problems within its own species, not physical and mathematical puzzles, as educational tests and some concern of philosophers might cause us to believe” (Alexander, 1989, p. 457). Knight and Doan (1994) propose that consciousness developed, in the first place, that we might be able to “do psychology” on ourselves and others. For Dennett (1991) consciousness is a dizzying succession of drafts of incoming information from all the senses that is “subject to continual editorial revision, which produces multiple drafts of narrative fragments all over the brain”. Something that Dennett calls a Joycean Machine “filters the multiple drafts and ultimately gives the illusion

of a single, stream-of-consciousness narrative” (p. 156). Dennett’s Joycean Machine is what I mean by a person’s narrated identity. It serves as the final filter.

Whichever constellation of stories that emanates from our identity narrative and becomes established and duly justified as our world, it must be defended as if our very survival were at stake. This also suggests that at the very core of our world is the image that we become convinced is the real me. This identity has primarily to do with social presentation and the importance of convincing others that one is such-and-such a person. In spite of this, we invariably fall short in our social presentations, particularly to the extent that our protection of our own sense of our identity narrative or self-image has taken on a life of its own. Thus expressions and gestures are observed by others, but often remain oblivious to the person himself. Freud used terms such as repression and denial to describe such discrepancies. In my view these are simply additional testimony to the psychological sciences’ adherence to mechanistic metaphors. Instead, as I have already suggested, each of us is constantly *interpreting* events in such a way as to confirm and protect the image we have become convinced *is* ourselves. The convincing nature of the stories we tell ourselves makes them indispensable vehicles by which we have come to identify, not only ourselves, but the very nature of the world. They are interpretive filters that all-but determine what, of all the stimuli that bombard us, gets in and what is left out. Invariably the latter includes memories, motives and feelings that would challenge or shame our narrated identity. We are constantly subject to disowned intentions.

Alexander (1989) also suggests that the self-presenting function of the psyche may have originally evolved as a vehicle for the highly vulnerable human child's optimal adaptation to the complex demands of the group. The child’s astonishing acquisition of complex language skills is related, Alexander suggested, to his freedom from the necessity to protect himself and instead to have the time and encouragement to practice social communication, including the cultivation of strategies that will prepare the child to become an accepted and protected member of the community and eventually an effective adult in that same community. Early experiences of love and security will provide the emotional foundation for the narrated identity that is necessary for life within a community. This identity begins to emerge with language development. To the

extent that the individual does not receive these necessities his narrated identity, is likely to be built upon a insecure and anxious foundation. Given the profound dependency and helplessness of the human child it seems doubtful that a fundamental sense of primal insecurity is ever fully overcome. We could go so far as to say that, without a sense of identity in family and community, he is in a state of terror. His soul is naked. The self-image he begins to form, therefore, constitutes his protection from a dread of abandonment. Small wonder the self-image is defended as a matter of life and death. It is a matter of social survival which, as with most social animals, is a life and death issue. Every effort will be made, once an identity narrative is in place, to protect the naked soul in its acute sense of vulnerability from attack. A veritable labyrinth in the form of self-justifying stories will be thrown up for its protection. Such stories will support the sense of the world that they illustrate and serve to interpret, but they inevitably lead back to their importance in reinforcing the self-image which Minotaur-like guards the vulnerability of the soul.

How expansive and inclusive the storied world is will be an extension of how firmly the I or narrator seeks its own confirmation in its self-appointed work of protecting the soul by means of the image it has created of itself. Left to its own devices the I would create a strong, confident and persuasive identity narrative. Alas, although the I is adept at convincing itself of whatever it seeks to convince others, it is highly susceptible to the capacity of others to convince it of the “truth” of *their* stories about itself. If those stories are disparaging, invalidating or discounting, and if they happen to be delivered amid intense emotions when the I is vulnerable, they are very likely to be believed. Once believed they too will be absorbed into the I’s identity narrative. Thus, that identity is apt to wind up as a character at war with itself as self-enhancing attributions and disparaging ones are argued by the confused I. Further complicating the picture is the fact that, although the me or identity narrative is a figment of the I’s imagination the psyche itself and the various givens of the person-sex, race, body, appearance, intelligence, temperament, genetic limitations--are all subject to the laws of nature. They do not necessarily do the I’s bidding. They may not measure up. Or they may be capable of doing much more than a deflated self-image would lead the I to expect. No matter. The I, once it *believes* its own image, is likely to become

upset at *any* discrepancy between performance and expectations.

The formation of the self-image is no more intentional than are the narratives we dream or the catastrophic scenarios we imagine when anxious. It emerges as a necessity of social living, protecting our vulnerability before others, giving ourselves and others a sense of our identity amidst the demands implicitly placed upon us by others who also need to know who we are. This process influences the ways we go on to story the world based on our identity narrative as the interpreter that selects what we perceive and fail to perceive in the world outside ourselves and in our own motives. It cannot be an intentional activity for the capacity to convince ourselves in order to convince others depends upon the capacity to do it so well that we become Nietzsche's (1887/1956, p. 149) knowers who are unknown to ourselves.

None of this is new to transactional analysts. The pursuit of interpersonal advantage is the very core of the psychological game which depends on keeping the ulterior motive outside awareness. This is best accomplished by the adoption of an unimpeachable social position, whether of virtue (Rescuer), righteousness (Persecutor) or innocence (Victim). The game emerges at the point at which a socially advantageous position is sought that cannot be admitted. To acknowledge that one is trying to better the other would put oneself at a social *disadvantage*. Social advantage is most advantageously pursued by convincing oneself and the other of one's moral superiority. An egalitarian situation, by contrast, is best achieved through conversation which involves the sharing of stories in the quest of a shared world.

### ***Listening to Our Own Stories, Sharing with Each Other***

Consciousness as a vehicle of personal change is coterminous with the advent of modernity, the experience of the world as primarily a place of change rather than of stability. Such consciousness, actually consciousness of consciousness, first glimpsed by Socrates, flourishes in the writings of Shakespeare, Cervantes and Montaigne. The secret of such consciousness lies in the cultivation of the willingness to *listen* to ourselves and each to the other while foregoing the temptation to *react* in the defense of our identity narrative. Listening allows one actively to compare one's own feelings and reactions in the midst of a clash of stories with

one's identity narrative to see whether the I is willing to accept such discrepancies as are taking place due to its own actions. Montaigne (1595/1958) put it well: "Caesar's life has no more examples for us than our own; whether an emperor's or a common man's, it is still a life subject to all human accidents. Let us but listen to it, and we will tell ourselves all that we chiefly need to know" (p. 354-355).

Listening to the stories we tell ourselves is one way of escaping domination by these stories. Listening to each other's stories is another. Because we are so psychological in the ways we try to influence each other we often resort to shame, blame and name-calling to accomplish our purposes. These do not facilitate the likelihood of hearing each other. Quite the contrary. Blaming virtually guarantees not listening. Shaming, however, can be a very effective way of silencing another. Telling people stories about themselves, whether in praise or criticism is a much more powerful way than telling them directly. The frequent resort to anger and impatience, especially with children, tells them with stories about themselves that leave them with negative and self-critical identity narratives. What else are they going to do but hear and believe the stories that their all-knowing parents tell them about themselves?

By contrast the establishment of an atmosphere that gives rise to the sharing of stories can only take place when exchanges between the participants is conversational in tone. In conversation reciprocity is in operation and no one person's opinion has authority over another's. As such it is the only interactional mode facilitative of listening, such that the participants are likely to hear themselves described by others. It creates a readiness for openness toward others and toward the possibility of self-correction. This replaces the mode of defensiveness that is in operation whenever a person's narrated identity is felt to be on the line. The exchange of feedback between those who love and trust one another, in fact, provides the most healing antidote to the self-deluding of which the identity narrative is constantly at risk.

From conversational feedback to the sharing of one another's stories in an open atmosphere encourages a further step which is the emergence of a sharing of worlds. To the extent this begins to take place the self-image of the identity narrative need not exercise itself with such determination and guardedness in its own defense and preservation. In a world of

shared stories the I may assume less the role of protecting an established though always precarious me, and more the playful role as author, actively shaping in a prospective way the character of the me becoming artists of one's own life. In a world of shared stories there is a decided place for the I as artist because she belongs to a world larger than simply her own. All the world is her stage.

The third mode of listening involves what I call soul-listening: listening to those experiences at the edges of consciousness that often challenge our identity narrative. The capacity humans have for self-consciousness comprises only a portion of that which our consciousness is capable. Sometimes called the psyche, mind or psychic apparatus. I prefer to call it *soul*. The narrated identity is the portion of the soul accessed to achieve the most advantageous social presentation. It is the part of the soul that gives us the illusion we are in control of ourselves. It is more likely that while self proposes soul disposes. As an expression and extension of our embodiment it is self-organizing. Walt Whitman (1855/1954) said, "Oh I say, these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul. Oh I say now these are the soul!" (1855/1954, p. 105).

It is, in a sense, much like what is often called the unconscious, although more like Milton Erickson's self-healing hidden resources (Erickson & Rossi, 1979, p. 138) than Freud's cauldron of libidinal and aggressive drives. I would rather define it as the domain from which we turn away. Not being readily controllable or predictable, but subtle and soft instead, we are not very comfortable with the soul. We have become especially uncomfortable with things we cannot fix, still believing in the machine metaphor. As with all things we believe to be true, when it does not work we try harder. Yet it works no better--except as a recipe for chaos. I suggest that the soul, as the self-organizing dimension of the psyche, responds spontaneously to unexpected challenges by rising to higher levels of complexity appropriate to the situation (Parry, 1996). Feedback as information from and to the soul so that it enters the domain of conversation, may be the clue we have been looking for as a therapeutic approach to replace the "man the machine" metaphor. Instead of fixing what seems wrong we may then allow the self-healing intrinsic to living systems in jeopardy that occurs at the *edge* of chaos (Parry, 1996). Chaos may be defined

as that domain in which change occurs so rapidly a system is apt to bifurcate at the slightest disturbance, the edge of chaos or complexity is the domain in which change is sufficient to perturb a system to self-organize commensurate to the challenge.

### ***Therapy for the Soul***

When a person's stories begin to clash so frequently with other people's stories, she begins to realize that her stories are no longer working for her and she loses confidence in herself. She does not realize that she is dealing with stories, not reality. The time is ripe for the deconstruction of the world her stories have constructed. Although experienced as looming chaos because she identifies her reality with her story, she is on the verge of an opportunity: the chance to rewrite her story and make herself an artist of her own life. Her identification of herself with her story has occurred, in the first place, because she believes the stories she tells herself. Once she enters therapy, the hold constituted by her belief must be challenged so that her stories begin to be heard simply as stories, narrative constructions of a world. The first step in challenging this belief in her own stories is for her to begin *listening* to herself telling them as she listens to them. The second step is for her to begin listening to the challenge to her stories that her current chaotic circumstances represent. Although frightening, these can be seen as pushing her toward a larger and more complex story. The third step is to begin to invite and listen to the opinions of others about how she is experienced by them. She compares what she has come to believe about herself with the impressions she believes she makes that are filtered through the images created in her identity narrative. Feedback, listening to soul, and the stories of others, is what turns impending chaos into the antichaos of optimal living (Kauffman, 1991; Parry, 1996). Antichaos, or life on the edge of chaos, is what makes good stories. The final step is taken when she finds herself to be part of a shared story in which a renewed identity narrative is part of a shared world in which she has the opportunity to participate, replacing the narrative that is busy defending its own beleaguered world.

### ***Conclusion***

We have probably been telling stories to each other ever since we as a species first devised language. From there it was a short step and, in all likelihood, a short time only before it

was discovered that one could carry on a conversation almost as well with oneself as with another and, in so doing, fashion a world through the stories told to oneself. One could even convince oneself, perhaps more easily than another, that such stories were true. We have lived until now equating our stories with the truth about reality. In a postmodern world the truth claims of all such stories have been cast in doubt. Will a species so enchanted by stories that it surely cannot live without them be content to live by stories embraced as personal and social fictions? Wallace Stevens urged us to do just this: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe it willingly" (quoted in Hillman, 1983, p. ix).

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