A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with short, light-colored hair, smiling warmly. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and grey.

# Tell a Story

Be Heard, Be Understood, **Create Interaction**

– experienced and told by  
storyteller Svend-Erik Engh

Preface by Steve Denning

 **fokus forlag**

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For further information please visit:  
[www.fokus.dk/Tellastory](http://www.fokus.dk/Tellastory)

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## **Foreword**

*by the author*

This is a book filled with stories. In these stories you will find a great deal of information. Be patient.

If you are looking for a concrete answer to a specific question, like how do I improve my stories, not my storytelling, you will find the answer, but it is spread around in the book.

I hope you can find some good advice as you read the book. I have myself learned a lot from the process of writing it, and I hope that you can benefit from some of this knowledge.

## **Preface**

*by Steve Denning*

At first sight, the worlds of storytelling and organizations look very different. Storytelling is often viewed as being about fabulous tales of glorious heroes and beautiful heroines, narratives that make the imagination soar and the heart leap. It seems far from the world of business, commerce and making money, with talk of performance targets, budgets, work programs, the bottom-line and the like.

The two worlds are apparently so different that until recently they have been profoundly suspicious of each other, each certain of the validity of its own assumptions and conduct, each seemingly unable or unwilling to grapple with what they might learn from the other. Storytellers could talk to storytellers and managers could talk to managers, but managers and storytellers couldn't make much sense of what the other group was saying. And what little they did understand of the other's discourse, they didn't much like.

In my case, I had a career grounded in the world of organizations. For the first several decades of my working life, I was a manager in the World Bank in Washington DC, USA. It was force of circumstance led me away from the world of the boardroom, the negotiation table and the computerized spreadsheet to the radically different world of storytelling. At the time, I was facing a leadership challenge with which the traditional tools of management seemed impotent to assist. In trying to communicate a new idea to a skeptical audience, I found that rigorous analysis wasn't working.

As someone who had spent my life believing in the dream of reason, I was startled when I stumbled on the discovery that an appropriately told story had the power to do what rigorous analysis couldn't – to communicate a strange new idea easily and naturally and quickly get people into enthusiastically positive action. Despite a career of scoffing at such touchy-feely stuff – like most business executives, I knew that analytical was good, anecdotal was bad – my thinking changed. I saw that stories could galvanize an organization around a defined business goal.

By contrast, Svend-Erik Engh is someone who has made the reverse journey. He comes from a career in the world of storytelling and ventured into the world of organizations. Thus he spent much of his working life telling stories at festivals, at carnivals, in schools, in libraries, in bars, in cafes, in theaters, anywhere that people gather to be entertained by stories.

Then one day the telephone rang and he was summoned into the world of organizations and apply what he knew about storytelling to their problems. This book is an account of what happened to him on that journey into the world of organizations.

There was much to be learned.

First, he had to learn the language of organizations. When he encountered this world, he found that people were talking of things like rates of return, cost-benefit analysis, risk assessments – a radically different language from the tales of heroes and heroines.

He had to learn the habits and practices of organizations – what was permitted and what was not permitted in the sometimes strange and wonderful customs of business.

He had to learn what kind of stories work in business – something different from what worked in a storytelling festival. He had to learn what kind of narrative worked for what purpose and why.

And in the process, he had to learn who he was. Initially, he presented himself as a storyteller – a stranger to the world about organizations. But as time went on, and he worked for several years in organizations and mastered the language and the customs of this world, he could no longer credibly present himself as a total stranger. He had become to a certain degree – and to his own surprise – an insider.

I was honored to be part of Svend-Erik's journey. We did workshops together in Scandinavia. I shared with him what I knew about the world of organizations and he taught me about the world of storytelling. We had fun together and I learned a lot.

Now that Svend-Erik has learned to converse in the world of organizations and commerce, he is taking on the role of a go-between – someone who can report back to the two different worlds what is going on in each.

That is the interest of this book. To storytellers who are interested in making such a journey from storytelling into organizations. And to

managers and people in organizations who are wondering whether there is anything in storytelling that is of relevance to business.

The book points out matters of profound interest to both the world of storytelling and the world of organizations.

In writing it, Svend-Erik has done a service to both worlds, and I hope you find it both educational and entertaining.

Steve Denning

*Steve Denning is the author of:*

1. *The Sonnets, Writers Club Press, 2000*
2. *The Painter: A Novel of Pursuit, Writers Club Press, 2000*
3. *The Springboard, Butterworth & Heinemann, 2001*
4. *The Squirrel Inc., Jossey and Bass, 2004*
5. *Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Jossey-Bass, 2005*
6. *The Secret Language of Leadership, Jossey and Bass, 2007*

*Find more on Steve Denning here: [www.stevedenning.com](http://www.stevedenning.com)*

## What Is a Story?

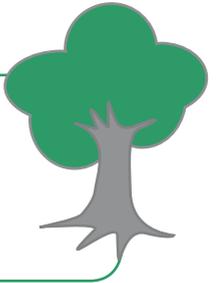
An oral story is a way to process reality. Every time a story is passed on, it becomes a new interpretation of reality. The way your listener reacts when you tell your story tells you something about your relationship with that person. You understand the world through the stories you tell about it. The response you get shows something about your relationship with the world.

You unconsciously edit reality so that it fits in with how the listener perceives reality.

*The story you hear is a different story than the one the storyteller is telling.*



You tell about other people who either fit into the description of reality that you call the world or are markedly different. The way you talk about people who are not like you shows a clear and unmistakable mirror image not only of the person you are talking about, but also of the person telling the story. You are your stories, and you must act in accordance with what your stories say about your perception of reality.



There are innumerable sensory impressions that never become a story. It is not a story that I make coffee that I then drink, although some would say that my choice of coffee tells part of my story. I consume; therefore I tell a story. Mostly, I drink organic Max Havelaar fair-trade coffee. Already you think you know me a little bit better, I'm sure. I like Zepto<sup>1</sup> computers; I drive in an old Citroën; I live in an old brick house just outside suburban Birkerød, a house onto which we constantly add new wood-panelled extensions. All this is part of the story I'm trying to tell – or is it?

Did Zepto or Max Havelaar pay me to say this? I have heard that companies are paying youngsters to tell their friends about the qualities of a certain product. I find that very scary because it interferes in what is one of the most vulnerable things in this life: relationships between human beings. A lot of things can go wrong, and one of them is distrust. And if you can't trust me when I tell you about how wonderful my new laptop is, how can you trust me in other matters?

It makes me tired every time I hear people defined as consumers and not much else. I see people defining themselves as people every day: not as consumers – at least not only as consumers.

The method most often used when people get together – and not to exchange consumer goods – is stories. It doesn't cost anything; you don't need props, and you don't have to play any roles.

---

<sup>1</sup> A Danish laptop company.

*All you need is memory, a mouth and two ears.*

I select when I meet the mail carrier, and she dyed her hair red since I saw her last. Then I have to figure out whether I like red hair, whether I like mail carriers with red hair, or whether I just basically don't care. (But I'm choosing to tell the story, so it's obvious that I care.)

I select when the garbage can is full, and someone has thrown a full bag of waste on top of the already all-too-full receptacle. In the evening, at the dinner table, with all of us in the family gathered together, I tell the story of the overflowing garbage can. There is a clear purpose behind my telling the story: I want someone in the house to change their behavior.

In the feeling, in the interaction with my surroundings and with the people around me, the need arises to make the world fall into place by telling stories.

Luckily, it is often that, when people meet, they make sweet music or irritating noise or a little trivial muzak that finds its way to the ears. But there has to be music before an action can become a story. The reason I tell stories is to put lyrics to the music so I can learn more about what it is my surroundings are doing to me.

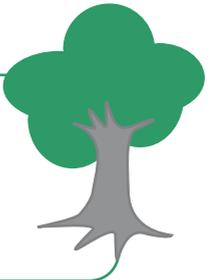
## Chapter 2 – Why Storytelling?

# 2

**I**n 2000, my son Asger, a year and a half old at the time, and I sat playing in a pile of sand right by the road. It was a beautiful summer day, and when we left that place, we both felt good.

One week later, the rest of my family came walking by the place where we had played. When my son spotted the sand pile, he began gesturing and speaking in incomprehensible baby talk to my wife. She laughed and looked at my son with loving eyes, and we all felt good when we left there.

**Stories have been told for as long as people have existed.  
It is a way for a person to become part of the tribe.**



## Emotions/Structure – Story/Action

Asger was filled with an emotion – in this particular case it was joy – and like all human beings, he is like a bathtub. When the tub is filled with water, the water just runs wherever it wants to.

His mind, his heart and his body were filled with all the joy the two of us had shared. When he told his story to his mother, his body jumped up and down and his face showed a wonderful smile. And Asger discovered an enormous power. His mother laughed back. And then his mother smiled to his father, and his father turned to Asger said he also had a wonderful day.

The biggest magic in the world: somebody cares about you and the people you care about care about each other. It doesn't get any better than that.

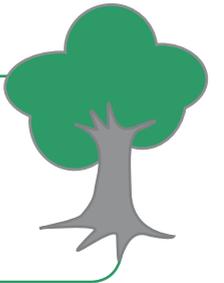
## Strange Reality

Reality is a strange thing. Sometimes it almost seems logical. But then in an instant somebody smiles at you or hurt your feelings or surprises you. You're hit by an emotion and, because you're human, you just have to put that emotion in a framework. You build a structure around it. You tell a story.

And you find that structure inside your DNA, because you know it works. It did that when you were born, when you were two years old, and again when you fell in love, and again when you talked to your children, and again in the movies you watched, and again at the theater, and again in your dreams, and again and again...

Do you remember when you were a small child, before you could read or write? When somebody or something hurt you, you cried. Then somebody else came and, crying, you told them what had happened. And then action was taken. Somebody did something so that pain disappeared; next thing somebody did was to prevent the bad things from happening again or, if it was a good sensation, talked about how it could happen again.

*Whenever there are two people, there is an emotion,  
then a story and whenever there is a story, there is action.*



## A Positive Listener

My son demonstrated one of the fundamental aspects of storytelling by telling the story to my wife, not to me, although it was me that was pushing the baby carriage.

But I had been there, you see, when it originally happened, and to create a new space, the story had to be told to my wife. This allowed our son to take part in the world twice:

1. by doing something with his father that made us both happy, and
2. by telling his mother about it, thus creating a new happiness, one not unlike the first.



*We tell our stories even before we have language.*

*We leave our footprints behind whenever we tell a story.*

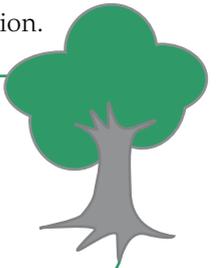
## A Newcomer

An employee starts at his or her new workplace and begins hearing stories about the other employees, the values, the vision and the mission statement. The new employee asks a simple question, "Does the company do what they say they do?"

Depending on what the reality in the company is, the newcomer will consciously or unconsciously pick out a few of the stories told in the company and start retelling them in a way that reflects his values and the way he thinks things should be done.

In an interaction with the reality in the workplace, the newcomer acts, tells and is told about – and that is how the newcomer becomes a part of the company.

Like Asger, every human being acts and uses stories to make his or her actions understandable. The way the stories are transformed tells the employee whether or not he or she is accepted by the organization.



*Tell what you do and do what you tell.*

## Oral Storytelling

An extraordinary sense of fellowship arises when a story is told out loud, a fellowship between the person telling the story and the person listening. People perceive themselves as co-creators of both the images that arise in their minds from the storytelling and the structure of the story.

Enriched by the experience, they will subsequently be able to transform and change reality. They are co-creators of the world while the story is being told and can thus afterwards truly be co-creators of reality, the real reality. It is an utterly dizzying perspective.

Oral storytelling is a state, a state characterized by good vibrations and interaction.



*A story that is told aloud does not just describe reality; it also transforms it.*

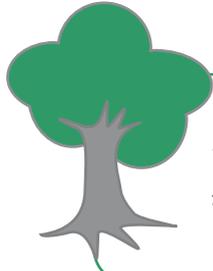
## Two-Way Communication

What can a modern person in a stress-filled job get out of an old-fashioned form of communication like storytelling? Can't we just text a message or write an e-mail? If we do that, haven't we communicated what we wanted to? If I hold a presentation, isn't the only important thing that I select my very best PowerPoint slides so that my message gets through? If only my PowerPoint slides are good enough, then I'm sure that my audience will really listen and receive the message.

A big problem with modern means of communication is the amount of dead information they involve. There is so much noise in the transmission that we spend most of our waking hours sorting relevant information from irrelevant.

The written statements and PowerPoint slides have one weakness: they don't invite me inside. They don't need me. It's a done deal. The communication – or, rather, the flow of information – happens even if I leave the room, eat watermelon, fall in love, die, or go to Hawaii. I am not important.

Old-fashioned media – books, radio, TV and the movies – are characterized by one-way communication. It is impossible to change the messages or form your own images. In the long run, it's not that interesting. I want to help create what is being told.



*When I listen to a story, I know that I'm having a constant influence on it.*

It may not be something you notice consciously, but just the feeling of eye contact, the direct and clear communication between two people, is enough for me as a listener to feel that I am important in determining the direction the story will take. Each of the people listening to a story affects how the story develops.

It is a strong feeling to take with you out into the real world. You helped shape the story; now go out and shape reality. You have to experience it to understand it completely: how the almost hypnotic state a story can put a person in can activate and create at the same time.

As the storyteller, you enter into an unpredictable dance between different conflicts of interest that constantly shift from one to another. This complementary dance of contradiction is what I call "good vibrations and interaction."

If you translate this into the world of organizations, interplay – or interaction – means that

- a modern company enters into an ethical, social and environmental interaction with the society of which it is a part.
- a leader offers specific pictures of future opportunities and starts behaving according to them.
- tell what you do – do what you tell.
- employees must act in accordance with the values that are accepted where they work.

**The Pea**

*“A Well-Known Story from Another Viewpoint”*

or

*“How Does the World Look from Underneath Twenty Mattresses, Twenty Eiderdown Beds and a Princess?”*

**O**nce upon a time, there was a pea that knew it was destined to grow up and have a different future than most peas. The pea felt deep down inside that it would one day be the most famous of all the world’s peas.

*“People will tell stories about me,” it thought, closing its green eyes and imagining a grandmother sitting with a book on her lap and all the children wanting to hear the fairy tale about the fantastic pea. It heard part of the story. It heard that the fairy tale was about a prince, a queen and a young woman that might well be the princess she told them she was. The pea saw the beautiful girl, shivering from the cold, and the pea felt that it had a major role to play in the story at exactly that point in the story, although it wasn’t clear what its role was.*

*The ending was so bright, though: the pea was lying on red velvet on display in a museum, and everyone admired the pea and said how handsome a pea it was, all green and round. And it would make the world a little greener.*

*But we all know the real story of that pea: that the pea had to suffer so much, not on velvet but on the floor. It had to lie there a whole night, underneath twenty mattresses, twenty eiderdown beds, and what might or might not be a princess.*

*We know that in the morning, after all the fuss about her being a princess, the maid swept the green oily spot off the floor and threw it in the garbage can. It was so sad.*

*When Hans Christian Andersen came by and heard the wonderful story, he wanted to write it down so he could become famous. The story was called "The Princess on the Pea", and he wanted the pea to be put in a museum. The queen carefully selected the most beautiful green pea left in the bowl.*

*It is this pea that lies there on the red velvet in the museum, while our hero looks down from his pea heaven, just a little bit envious.*

## **An Artisan Storyteller**

I'm an artist, not a consultant. I have held many presentations and workshops that turned out very badly. Naturally, I've also had days where I can hardly keep from constantly throwing my arms into the air from sheer enthusiasm. I have been successful when I maintained a focus on my starting point as an artist. To me, being an artist means that I see the world as a place where paradoxes meet, poetry rules and everything sometimes turns upside down. It's good for the world to take a roller-coaster ride like that sometimes.

When I was young, the choices I had were either to go crazy and get locked up in a mental institution or to become an artist. Luckily, I chose the latter.

When I look at what I can contribute at companies and organizations, I see three things:

1. I can tell stories.
2. I can listen to stories. Stories should be told as if you were telling someone about what just happened out on the street. Businesspeople get so nervous when they have to tell stories that some smart consulting firm charged a fortune to come up with, or if they know that the whole future of the company or organization depends on them telling the story well. Then I'm the artist that can tell them that it is not that important. Forget your intentions and let me hear your story, from one person to another.
3. I can turn things upside down, be creative and find solutions that aren't immediately apparent by looking at things from a pea's eye view.

There is danger in an artist meeting people from the world of business: one thing is that, as an artist, I risk disappearing. I could also lose my usual leather jacket and turtleneck, instead donning a nice suit, trying to look like a million bucks, and then just generally act like everyone else in the corporate world.



***If the meeting between art and business is to be advantageous to both, there has to be mutual respect.***

In his book *A Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, Steve Denning<sup>2</sup> describes how he went to a storytelling festival and told his 16-word story on the health worker from Zambia – “in Kamana, who in June 1995 logged himself on to the Center for Disease Control Web site and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.”<sup>3</sup>

The professional storytellers had a very negative response to his story. Where were the descriptions of the people in the story? Where was the plot? Who was the opponent in the actant model? And so on and so forth.

This example shows how stereotypical we are in the way we function. These storytellers did not hear the effect of his story, and they didn't see that the story had to be viewed in its context.

The 16-word story about a health worker in Zambia had impact on World Bank staff because Steve Denning and his crew supported the lesson learned from that story: we need to change behavior.

And because there was coherence between the spoken word, the man telling the story and the behavior from the rest of the group, the story itself didn't have to possess Oscar-winning qualities.

The storytellers at the storytelling festival only analyzed the story based on a storyteller's premises – a poor effort on their part, in my opinion.

On the other hand, I've seen examples of storytelling – after the art encounters the business world – being transformed into an abstract, analytical maneuver that ordinary people don't understand.

When smart people who know something about storytelling get up and turn their backs to me to read aloud from a PowerPoint slide, then I know there's something wrong, that there is a basic lack of respect for what a story is.

Get up on your feet, look into our eyes and tell us a story. You claim that stories can change the world. Show us!

<sup>2</sup> Steve Denning, *A Leader's Guide to Storytelling* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Steve Denning, *The Springboard* (Woburn, MA: Butterworth and Heineman, 2000), p. 10.

**T**he early nighttime is filled with sounds. The trill of a nightingale comes from the tall thicket. A sheep bleats nervously from the fold below. A drake laughs scornfully. Around a campfire sits a small group of people wrapped in gray woolen blankets, speaking together in low tones.

*I am at Denmark's first International Storytelling Festival in 1996. Storytellers from all over the world are gathered at the Lejre Experimental Centre.*

*I had volunteered to pick the storytellers up at the airport and drive them to Lejre; I have just begun my professional storytelling career and am just there to learn what I can.*

*The audience has gone home, and only storytellers and festival staff remain.*

*There are merry voices coming from inside one of the small cottages. I knock on the door. An old man with a Scottish accent invites me inside, grinning. I am invited to sit and offered a spot on the floor. The old man is Duncan Williamson, who claims to know more than a thousand stories. We probably won't be able to hear that many this night, but we might manage a few.*

Someone lights a candle. It is a large room with small bunk beds along all the walls, a white curtain across each of the beds. There are fifteen storytellers staying in this same room.

Duncan is telling a funny story; it's almost a joke. As he tells it, he is a young man again. When the story is over, we all laugh, and we hear people laughing from behind the bed curtains.

The invisible threads of night are being woven between us. At one point, I lean back and can see the first red stripes in the sky of the sun on the horizon. Time and the stories are gone; left are a number of images, moods and thoughts. I have learned a great deal this night, also about myself. A story dies away, and we all sit still for a few seconds.

Then Duncan says, "That reminds me of a story."

The curtain on one of the beds is drawn back, just enough to allow the head of a tired woman to come into view. "Which we're not gonna hear. Goodnight, gentlemen."

We look a little at each other, get up and go outside. It's probably about four in the morning, and the sun – which comes up early at this time of year in Scandinavia – is rising above the horizon. A new day is starting, with more and more birds tentatively joining what is rapidly becoming a wonderful cacophony of birdsong, as if testing to see whether their voices still work all right after a night of silence. They certainly do.

We all stand in a row, looking at the sunrise and marking our territory: happy boys having a good time together, a time we will always remember with great pleasure.

## The Secret of a Storyteller

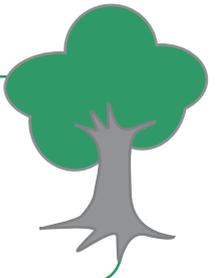
You ask me if there is some secret to storytelling. If there is one, then I just revealed it to you.

You ask again, this time a bit impatiently, and ask me not to reply with yet another story. You tell me that it must be possible to give a few statements or rational arguments that can sell the point that storytelling is good for your organization.

If that isn't possible, then it must be possible to make a couple of PowerPoint slides with nice arrows and a few circles overlapping each other.

I don't know whether I have made it clear to you, but my point is exactly that what you are asking me to do is not good.

**Bullet-point statements and models only water down reality – make it one-dimensional.**



I warn you. This is not the best way to argue whether or not storytelling should be a way for your organization to use storytelling. The best argument is a story.

But as far as I understand it, you would love to have these one-way rational arguments. So OK, I will give it a try.

### What Can You Learn from a Storyteller?

A good story well told actually adds more dimensions to reality. That is also one of the reasons why a story should be told rather than written down. A story told aloud makes manifest many more layers of reality than a "flat" written story could ever do.

That is why I wrote the story with which I started this chapter. It would have been best to tell it to you in person, but the point of writing it down is:

- It explains what storytellers do on their day off – tell stories – or the second-best thing: listen to stories. We can't help it.
- The images the stories elicit remain after the stories themselves are gone – and I learn about myself by noting which images remain in my memory, in my head.
- Listening to stories is a physical activity: you create images in your mind while you are listening.

- Being present in the now is something you can practice.
- Storytelling generates energy, both in the listener and the storyteller. You must keep a tight rein on the story, otherwise it all turns into fun, but otherwise smoke and mirrors.

### What Can an Oral Story Do?

A story told aloud:

- **Invites.** Each individual employee can form their own pictures in their head. This interactive aspect is a fundamental aspect of storytelling: that reality is created and changed as it is being described.
- **Gathers together.** It turns complex reality into simple images.
- **Activates.** It stimulates the other half of your brain. For example, I normally work with smells and with sounds: two different associations that activate very different centers in the body.
- **Stimulates.** It makes us feel like children again. A girl once told me, "It's just like dreaming while you're awake."

## How Can a Storyteller Help You Understand Your Organization Better?

In my encounters with the business world, it has always fascinated me deeply that I as a storyteller could have anything to contribute to your world. That was what I thought the first time I encountered the world of business as a storyteller, and I think so still.

Storytelling and what people do at work have a great deal in common. Four of the most obvious things are as follows.

As a storyteller, I know something about

1. interacting.
2. creating images.
3. the importance of a good story.
4. creating a metaphor that is alive and becomes an organic part of the shifting reality that an organization is.

In a perfect organization, with a flat structure and in which management has the courage to maintain a running dialog with staff, then all the opportunities are there to exploit each of these four things that, as a storyteller, I know something about.

In this perfect organization, there are some guidelines that can be drawn from this knowledge.

As a leader, you have to

- be able to navigate and delegate.
- clearly express what you want from the future.
- have a good story that separates your workplace from the rest.

As an employee further down on the organizational ladder, you have to

- make the story of your organization your own, and take it further in a loyal and yet deeply personal way.
- weave yourself into the story of your workplace.
- be active in the specific expression of what you want from the future.

Over the past few years, as I have come to know your world better, there seem to be four other things that characterize people in a real-life organization:

1. You are busy.
2. Your reality is constantly changing without anyone consulting you about it first.
3. You are met with growing demands every day.
4. You will be even busier in the future.

Being busy kills any kind of innovative thinking, storytelling or happiness. So you have to work towards the perfect organization. And one way to get there is by telling stories that embody this goal.

Another goal is to learn how to be present, to learn that this moment is magic. The next moment will be magic as well, but if we constantly think about all the good things to come, we forget to enjoy what this moment, this instance can bring us.

### **Double Presence**

*While you are telling your story, you must be aware of the reactions of your listeners. Is that possible at all?*

*I am at the 2002 Lejre Storytelling Festival. I am outside the farm cottages area. I suppose there are about 80 people sitting in the sun listening to my stories. Steve stands at a bit of a distance. I can feel that I'm concentrating more than usual today. I dance, whirl above my stories and then suddenly stand still and feel how they change.*

*When I'm done, Steve comes over to me. He tells me I'm a completely different person when I'm telling stories. I protest: I'm not playacting. I'm not playing the role of a storyteller. Then he laughs and says I'm being touchy.*

*He says that what he saw was that I underwent a transformation, as if I transformed myself into a different state, a state of 100% presence. I explain that the presence comes from my perceiving storytelling as an interactive dance, that I can be 100% present in my stories and see all the images, feel all the feelings, and smell all the smells in the story, while at the same time being 100% aware of how each listener down there is breathing, is with me, is participating through the images they are forming in their minds.*

### *Seven Stories about My Work*

#### **First Story – in the Year 2000 What Works? – Corporate Psychologists**

The telephone rings. It is a summer afternoon. I'm sitting there, looking at the dirty windows and feeling guilty. On top of the pleasure of knowing that my house is growing more valuable every day, I also have the pleasure of being reminded every day of all the things I don't manage to finish.

I answer the phone. A friendly woman's voice introduces herself as Lisette Jespersen, corporate psychologist. She explains that she represents a group of psychologists that specialize in working with companies and organizations. Every year, the group holds an annual meeting that also features various seminars and other events. It is important for the group to be up on the very latest developments in their field, and Lisette explains that the very latest thing is for companies and organizations to work with something she calls "corporate storytelling." Um, could she explain what that is? She tries; she really tries, but when she's done I'm completely confused.

She reassures me and says it's about telling stories. She tells me she saw my Web site, and she thinks I could hold an exciting presentation for this group of corporate psychologists: a combined presentation and workshop in the art of telling a good story.

I would like to take this job, not only for the money, but also because it sounds interesting. There is, however, just one thing I need to say before I say yes.

I tell this friendly woman that I know absolutely nothing about organizations.

She laughs and says that it doesn't matter. I know something about telling stories, and that's what they want to hear about. They already know how an organization works, and don't worry: they'll figure out how they can use what I know in their work.

Then I think of the concept of interaction. It'll be fine. I just have to remember not to take it too seriously and to stick to what I know how to do: tell stories, tell about storytelling, and get other people to tell stories.

The friendly voice on the other end of the line confirms this and says, "Don't worry. We'll take what you teach us and incorporate it into the development of narrative systems in the world of organizations."

A bit tentatively, I ask her what she means by "narrative systems." She laughs and says just to come to the meeting and tell them about what I do: storytelling. When I hear her laugh, I understand that everything will be just fine, and I accept her invitation to perform for the gathering of organizational psychologists.

**I prepare the best I can.**

I take my five years of experience in teaching storytelling to adults in continuing education and drive to the training centre where the annual meeting is being held. I park the car and walk inside. The receptionist tells me they're expecting me. It's always nice to be expected.

Lisette walks out of the room where the corporate psychologists are gathered for their meeting. She tells me that they've had a really good day and that they were looking forward to this evening's event. She shows me the room where I'll be presenting. I walk around it, noting the different characteristics of the room, the lighting, the acoustics – and where will I be standing? Where will they be sitting? I check that there are no lights behind me (they would blind anyone who wants to listen to my stories and watch my face at the same time) and check that I'm in the centre, that the audience will be sitting comfortably, and so on.

After dinner, we gather in the room that I've already "warmed up."

My presentation is divided up into four parts:

1. A personal story to introduce the storyteller
2. Introducing storytelling as a concept, with a special focus on the concept of interaction
3. Exercises based on the audience's personal stories
4. A Chinese legend– "The Ten Suns" – and a conversation about the content of the story.

I work my way through these four parts and discover that I've put together a great program without knowing a thing about how organizations work and function.

Using specific practical examples, I give them an introduction to storytelling theory. It is a method I still use: start with practice and then move to theory.

First I tell them how easy it all is; then I show them. When you tell a story, you just do what you always do when you are relaxing with other people.

At the same time, it's incredibly fascinating how complex it is. Everything in oral storytelling is interaction, in a friendly vibrating dance between contrasts.

## **An Evening with the Organizational Psychologists: Step by Step**

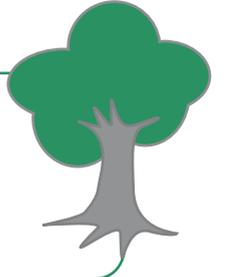
### **1. A personal story to introduce the storyteller**

The best way for a storyteller to introduce him- or herself is to tell a story. I tell a personal story about who I am and where I come from, a story that in many ways shows why I am who I am.

*We lived on Magnolia Street, in the big building at the end of the street. We were the Jensens, and we lived in Apartment No. 44 on the second floor. It was a two-room apartment, and there were four of us to share it: my mother Rigmor, my big sister Else Marie, my father Aage Verner, and me, little Svend-Erik.*

*It had a pretty big living room. Up against the wall separating the living room from the bedroom, there was a coke stove, and my dad could go down to the cellar to bring up fuel for the stove. The other room was a bedroom for all four of us. My mother and father slept on a pull-out bed, and my sister and I slept in bunk beds.*

*There was a vent in the wall between the two rooms to allow the heat from the coke oven into the bedroom. The television was in one corner of the living room, in a real monstrosity of a cabinet. We often watched TV surreptitiously through that vent, my big sister and I.*



***Tell them who you are. Show you are committed to the communication.***

## **2. Introducing storytelling as a concept, with a special focus on the concept of interaction**

The handicraft of storytelling can be divided up into its most important three parts:

- Have a good story. A good story is one that feels right deep down. Trust your gut instinct.
- Make clear pictures
- Good vibrations and interaction: create a place for joint responsibility; tell and listen at the same time; assume responsibility and let it go again; be a king and a humble servant at the same time. There are two times in a story when you are the king: the beginning and the end. That's the way it is with leadership, too: it is important that leadership is clear at the start and the end of a process. The organizational psychologists got two things out of this:

*One night, my mother told us to go to bed, saying that the movie that would be on soon was not for small children. My big sister protested: she wasn't a little kid. I was the only little brat around. My mother said we had to go to bed, said goodnight, turned off the light and went into the living room. As soon as we heard Mom and Dad settle into their chairs to watch the movie, I hopped into the top bunk with my sister.*

*Without making a sound, we jostled around until we could both watch the movie through the vent. My mother was right. It was not a movie for small children. At one point, it all got just a bit too scary for little Svend-Erik. When the hero walked towards the spot where the bad guy was standing behind the door with a very big knife, I yelled, "Watch out! Behind the-!"*

*Before I could say the word "door", my sister rammed her elbow into my side, and I doubled over in pain. "Idiot," she mouthed. I jumped down into my own bed again. My mother came in and told us again to go to sleep. After she left, we heard my dad close the vent. That was it for television viewing that evening. Else Marie didn't talk to me for days after that little episode.*

It is a story that took shape slowly from being told many times. The first time I told it was at a morning assembly at the Borup school where I was once employed. The story worked its magic. The people at the assembly laughed and relaxed. Laughter is important: it opens doors. People in an audience react at the same time, spontaneously. It's a strong shared experience, and it also gives you a real kick. Your brain gets a jolt of endorphin, a morphine-like substance that gives you energy.

- Techniques to become better at communicating orally.
- New knowledge about how, in the future, a workplace will have to be a part of the world around it, with its own environmental, social and ethical obligations; about how leaders should be able to interact with the other people at the workplace; and about how workers should be able to play with and against the values of their workplace.

### 3. Exercises: Personal stories

Hold a number of exercises whose most important element is the personal experiences they tell about. As is usual when the topic is personal stories, there will be lots of energy and laughter. I explain to them how important it is not to be seduced by the energy of telling about yourself: you can lose your focus, and it can have negative consequences. People are already skeptical about why they have to listen to or tell personal stories. You were not hired by your employers to go to therapy, and there is generally so little time at work that you don't have time for nonsense. That's why you must respect why your colleagues do not want to listen to a personal story if there is no reason to do so.

### 4. A Chinese legend – “The Ten Suns” – and a conversation about the content of the story.

Why do we work with metaphors?

*“The Ten Suns” is a legend about a Chinese god and his ten sons, all of whom are suns in the sky. Since there is only one sun in the sky at a time, the boys only have to work every ten days.*

*One day, they decide they all want to work together: ten suns in the sky at the same time. The heat is unbearable, so people appeal to the father of the suns, who decides that the celestial archer should shoot all the suns out of the sky. Almost too late, the god realizes that he can't just shoot all the suns down: no suns would be just as bad as ten suns. So he sends a celestial sprinter, who manages to get there just in time to break one of the arrows in the celestial archer's quiver. And that is why there is only one sun in our sky (and China's) today.*

It's a strong story.

Afterwards, I ask the organizational psychologists to talk about the legend, talk about the motivation of each character in the story and then discuss the relationships of these characters with each other.

The thought processes going on are apparent: you can see them thinking hard and reflecting over several topics, and they draw parallels to experiences from their work lives. Suddenly, a new kind of energy comes into play: perceptive thinking, something that I've worked with many times since.

## Intensity

The psychologists experience an unusual intensity: I have opened the door to the images in their heads by telling stories. Then I allow them to work with their own personal experiences. It starts with listening that can then be shifted to more structured talk: an interaction between heart and mind that works. In conclusion, I get them to work with transferring experiences from their work lives into a fictional setting.

Driving home, I realize I want to do more with this “corporate storytelling,” although I still don’t understand what it is. Since then, I’ve found it to be extremely inconvenient to speak of corporate storytelling: it involves way too much writing. So I just call it storytelling. That’s what it is, you know: stories being told.

What was interesting to me in this meeting of the organizational and storytelling worlds was that the encounter was so unforced. It was clear that they could use what I knew. Being able to provide guidance and advice to a complex world had tons in common with being able to create and communicate good stories.

Since this first attempt, I have successfully employed the following four-part structure, and I also tried to stick to the same concept in this book as well:

1. Presentation of the storyteller
2. The principle of interaction
3. Personal stories to get them started
4. Introduction of the concept of metaphor and reflection over themes in a certain metaphor

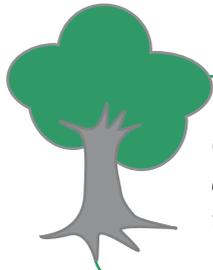
## Second Story – in the Year 2002 A Story Is Created, Northern Jutland

Four different town councils in northern Denmark decided that they would let a mixed group of project coordinators from the world of sports and the world of culture be together for 24 hours. The group was formed to strengthen cooperation between the two different worlds and to propose four projects for politicians the next morning. The four city councils were to be presented with at least four new ideas, each idea including project coordinators, budgets, time schedules, etc.

My job was to get the two different groups working together and connect them with a story. Each time the clock struck a new hour, I rang my bell and told the participants a new story about five minutes long. After the story, the facilitator told them the next step in the process, and the participants continued their work to find at least four acceptable projects.

I brought with me two imaginary characters: Jorgen from northern Denmark and Anina from Copenhagen. I knew very little about those two characters. I knew that Jorgen and Anina were supposed to fall in love and have children. How, when and what possible conflicts would be arising in that family? I would find out as I listened to the ideas for the future in the work of the group.

One group created a story about a boat competition. The group provided me with some information, and then I went for a walk to create my story.



*Creation is an activity that involves your body – walk around, dance or play – your body hold the answers, you just have to ask in the proper way.*

In this story, Jorgen and Anina met for the second time. Jorgen tried to impress Anina. He stood up in one of the boats. A ship passed by, and the wake caused Jorgen to fall into the water. Anina laughed and helped him into her boat. That was the first intimate touch. A kiss followed soon after.

Later another group suggested an idea about an international authors' festival. I went for a walk and created a story. At this stage in the process, Jorgen and Anina had two children: Maria and Anders.

Anders was about 12 at this point in the story. He won a writers' competition as part of the International Authors' Festival, but he wasn't happy. Jorgen read the boy's love poems and asked Anders what it was all about. So Anders told his father. He had fallen in love with a Swedish girl, a beautiful blond girl of 16. They talked for a while and just to talk helped the poor boy. After a while Anders smiled at Jorgen; it had been a long time since Jorgen had last seen that smile.

My job was to listen to the participants' ideas and give life and body to those ideas. Jorgen, Anina, Maria and Anders made the ideas become real.

Hanne Dahl was a manager from the small town of Nibe and part of the group that organized the 24-hour workshop.

She said, "It was a great experience to see the community being wowed like this during those 24 hours. These imaginary characters became living people to us in all our work – the stories were feeding the other side of our brains. So when we had to perform in front of the politicians after 24 hours of work, we were filled with enthusiasm and energy.

"The politicians accepted all the ideas we came up with, because they also could feel the power that had been generated from the creation of Jorgen and Anina."

### **Third Story – in the Year 2003**

#### **“I” Stories, “We” Stories and Future Stories, Novozymes**

The Danish company Novozymes is the largest enzymes manufacturer in the world. Its Biological Business Development (BBD) department looks into the future, developing new markets. It’s a group of ten people. The department head contacted me about a three-day workshop, so I held one introducing the three different types of stories inside an organization:

- Personal Stories
- We Stories
- Future Stories

The first day was personal stories: “Why are you here? What values do you bring into the company, and do the values of the company reflect your personal values? What happened at your first day at work? Tell us about your mistakes.”

The second day, we focused on we stories. “What are we as a group? What are we as part of the whole company? When did the group succeed and when did it fail? Can we learn from both?”

On the third day, I worked with future stories and used Steve Denning’s template for springboard stories.

It was three days filled with energy and hope for the future.

Later, I visited Novozymes’ BBD department, and the first thing I noticed when I got inside the office building was some black footprints on the wall. I asked the manager what it was. He laughed and said, “It is our footprints in the company. Each member of the department had their footprints put on the wall just to remind everyone that whenever you do something you leave a trace behind.”

### **Fourth Story – in the Year 2005**

#### **A Workshop with Steve Denning - Story Listening**

In the spring of 2005, Steve Denning and I worked with a group of leaders for two days, giving them an introduction to storytelling. The first day of the workshop was in March, and we met in Copenhagen. Steve Denning and I gave an introduction to organizational storytelling. I told them about interaction/interplay, and Steve presented a template of seven forms of storytelling to be used inside an organization. As always it was the springboard template that caught attention. It is so easy, Steve says: if you know the direction you want the organization to go in, you tell a story from the past from which this direction is already apparent.

I was to meet the group alone after one month, so we gave them some homework to do. They were to tell at least one story with an organizational purpose during the next month and be aware of the impact of the story as it was told.

We met again in April to exchange experiences. The group arrived with little expectations. Steve wasn’t there, and the group was a little nervous

about me being the facilitator. So my first response was crucial. Could I give them anything useful? I didn't have experiences from organizations – just from stories.

So I heard the first story and then gave my response in four steps:

1. **The strongest image that this story gave me was...** With this, you tell the storyteller that the story had an impact on you as a listener. Later, we used the strongest image in our attempt to improve the story.
2. **What I feel you did well was...** Positive feedback on the way the story was told is always nice to hear. This is very easy; everyone is an expert here.
3. **I felt I had lost the connection to your story when...** I told the storyteller when I felt there was no connection between her as a storyteller and us as listeners. One way I could tell was her eyes, but at one point I could also see she no longer had her feet firmly planted on the ground. The storyteller was amazed: it was just at that point in time she had felt uncertain.
4. **Suggestions of improvements for the story...** This began with the two different views: the strongest image and the moment of hesitation. Then we talked about the content of the story. The dialog we had was based on the principles of storytelling.

Everyone was amazed that one story and the way it was told had so much information hidden within it.

The day after the second workshop, I received an e-mail from Tove Schønning, a senior manager at Xact, an IT-consulting company here in Denmark with activities all over the world. The company uses stories for various reasons:

*Congratulations, Svend-Erik and Steve, for a very useful and good workshop. I especially found Steve's presentation super, and yesterday with Svend Erik was really "a knowledge kicking day," with focus on practical use and fine-tuning of stories.*

### **Fifth Story – in the Year 2007** **The Three Legs, Golden Fleece Copenhagen**

*Two legs sat upon three legs,  
With one leg in his lap;  
In comes four legs  
And runs away with one leg;  
Up jumps two legs,  
Catches up three legs,  
Throws it after four legs,  
And makes him drop one leg.*

In 2002 I attended my first Smithsonian/Golden Fleece workshops and conference in Washington. It was three days filled with insights, new knowledge, laughter and friendships that were established. I was inspired by the work of Steve Denning, Madelyn Blair, Poul Costello and others. It was a breaking point in my professional life.

In 2007 I decided to do a similar workshop here in Denmark.

So I contacted The Copenhagen Business School and we did a two day workshop with international and national presentators, among them Madelyn Blair, Steve Denning and Mary Alice Arthur.

Mille Matjeka, a dancer and playwright from Denmark and I introduced a new concept which we called Playful Storytelling.

The idea of this concept is that the body is a key memorizer. Stories are an excellent tool as described in this book to get attention to and responsibility for the changes ahead. We thought that we would like to explore the possibilities of the body and we hoped to improve the lasting impact on the attendants. If we could get these people to actually touch and feel the changes we thought the changes were better rooted.

First the whole group was doing an old Danish game with lots of joy and laughter. It opened the hearts and the minds.

Then we made the group work in smaller groups of three.

A story of a change in the working place was told. The group should then form a statue of the change, both possibilities and challenges. Then everybody could look at the change from various perspectives, just like The Pea under the mattresses.

This was the first of many workshops and the basis for a very successful two days workshop was created.

When we were about to finish the two days workshop Steve was asked how he saw the future of organizational storytelling. He said that he was very optimistic. His vision was to connect the analysis with the narrative and that it should be a natural part of every organisational development in the future. When he started with storytelling round the year 2000 he thought it would take 20 years to get there. Now it seems we are much closer to fulfilment of that vision.

I have been thinking about that vision. I share it. It is a beautiful vision.

But it is like the two legs missing one leg.

And that leg is the body.

So my vision is to establish a connection between Analysis, Narrative and Body – I think that could be reality in 2015. I will work for it.

## **Sixth Story – in the Year 2008**

### **A Metaphor about a Wolf for Devi Floor Heating**

Winter 2008. The Devi factory produces electrical floor heating. They are number one in Europe and would like to maintain that position, so demands on staff include great flexibility, high standards of quality and efficient communication – quite a cocktail.

About 50 white-collar workers are holding a teambuilding workshop. I am asked if I could run a process of teambuilding and at the same time create a metaphor for the group. I said, “Why not?”

We arranged a meeting with Lars Christiansen, the company’s vice president for supply chain and a consultant, Elisabeth Aarosin, the two in charge of the workshop. I suggested a program for the teambuilding part. Lars liked some of the suggestions; especially the “how things went this morning” exercise was well received. After a while, we agreed on a program.

Then we started talking about the metaphor. Lars showed me a picture of a wolf. I was surprised. I told him that normally the wolf is the bad guy, not our hero. He said it was because people don’t know the real wolf, the proud and independent animal he would like his employees to be. A wolf is a winner, he said, and a wolf never gives up. When the wolf smells his prey, he stays on the track no matter what.

Elisabeth asked me if I liked wolves. “Yes,” was the answer. I have always been fascinated by wolves; one of my favorite stories is a Transylvanian fairy tale about a man who kills his son because he thinks it is a wolf. I told them that I should save this story for another occasion.

So we agreed that I would hold a normal teambuilding workshop with exercises using personal stories, value stories and future stories. As the employees told us their stories, I would listen to them and from them create a metaphor with a wolf as one of the main characters. We should then discuss how the wolf metaphor was connected to their daily lives.

On the day of the workshop I introduced the power of storytelling. I started the session by talking for 40 minutes about storytelling, interaction and the three different kinds of stories they could find in an organization. Then I asked them to tell a partner about this morning, to explain what happened and why it was interesting. I gave them a three-step positive response model. The group was enthusiastic.

Then I asked them to tell a story about a choice they made when they were young. We selected the most touching story using a method I learned from Seth Kahan called the story jump-start process.<sup>4</sup> The group was silent while their four colleagues told their stories.

Instead of climbing trees, killing rabbits or other activities that are too much for some people, the attendees got to know their colleagues at the plant better, learned a new method of communication and had a lot of fun.

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<sup>4</sup> See more at <http://www.sethkahan.com>.

In the end of the day, I told them the wolf story, in which every one of them recognized parts of what I learned about them this day.

“Somewhere in the land of fairy tales, there once was a town at the end of a beautiful fjord. One day the people who lived in the town found wolf tracks in the snow. They didn’t understand. Wolves hadn’t been seen in those parts for a long time.

“And there was another surprise. Normally, the leader of the wolf pack makes the track with his paws, leaving one clear track in the snow. Then the rest of the pack follows the same track, putting their paws in the marks from the leader in the snow so the enemies of the wolves think there is only one wolf passing.

“These paw prints were different. Each of the wolves was anxious to leave his mark in the snow. Each of them made a track in the snow just to show that each of them was an individual.”

It was a story that reflected what I experienced with the group. They were a group of strong individualists who constantly challenged each other, themselves and their management. I had a wonderful time with the group, but they all could see the difficulties in their behavior. Still, it was important for management to encourage their differences. It would be worse if his employees just were a bunch of talking heads.

When I met with them again after one month, I had three statements about wolves with me. They formed groups of four and sat down to talk

about these three statements. After a while I asked each group of four to compose a story, and then tell their stories to the rest. Everyone was impressed by the quality of those stories.

A half year or so will have to pass before I can tell you whether or not storytelling is a success at Devi. Has their communication improved? After the workshop, the attendees talked about how much they learned at the workshop about each other and about the plant. The future will show if this newly attained knowledge will have a positive influence on the plant.

*Dear Svend-Erik,*

*Through this “tool” – as storytelling is in an organization – we have become aware on the impact of “a good story” as a means of communication. It has been a fruitful process.*

*The creation of a metaphor from a given starting point was done very well, and we are proud of “our own story.”*

*Sincerely,*

*DEVI A/S*

*Lars V. Christensen*

*Vice President, Supply Chain*

## Seventh story – in the year 2008

### H.C. Andersen: “The Travelling Companion”, Microsoft

Microsoft Danmark is a strong member of the Microsoft Corporation. They set the bar high, and a group of key managers is constantly looking for new ways to maintain the company’s strong position on the market. This is a challenging situation. It’s easy to motivate people to rise to the top, but to stay there requires something special. Storytelling could work as a motivating factor.

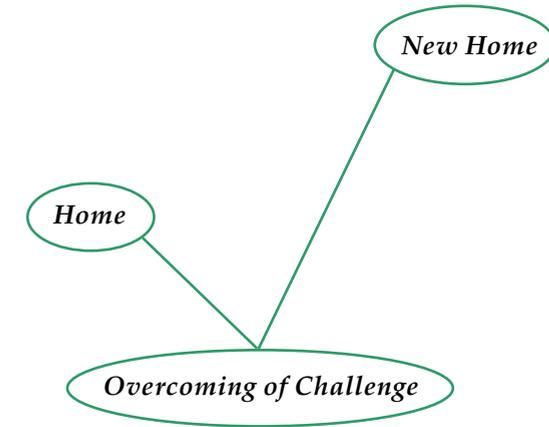
I’d been contacted by the manager of a group of nine account managers and production and technical specialists to do a two-hour workshop. I am supposed to create a metaphor that reflects the challenges the group faces and organize a workshop with “I” stories and “we” stories.

As it always is when I work with Microsoft, the workshop is challenging and highly productive. The Microsoft folks are professional in a very relaxed way.

I tell them what we are going to do for the next two hours. Then I talk about the mutual responsibility involved in an oral story, how to connect with customers in a way that involves the listener.

I introduce a model taken from fairy tales.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Propp, V. (1927). *Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans., Laurence Scott. 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968



To overcome the challenge mentioned in the model diagram, our hero needs a helper.

The following concepts are taken from a model called the actant model: helper, protagonist and opponent.

I tell the workshop attendees that “The Travelling Companion” by Hans Christian Andersen is a fairy tale that contains a character that is very clearly a helper. The travelling companion meets our hero John as he is walking towards the town where a wicked princess is killing suitors just for fun.

The travelling companion had picked up three bundles of sticks, a sword and a couple of swan wings. When the two arrive at the castle, the princess tells John that he must guess what she is thinking about in the morning when they meet again or forfeit his life.

So the travelling companion uses his sticks and the wings to fly with the princess out to the ugly magician that has enchanted her. The magician tells the princess that next morning she should think of one of her gloves.

The next morning, John knows what is on the princess' mind. The third night, the travelling companion uses his sword to cut off the head of the magician. And then the princess is released from her chains of enchantment, and John can marry her.

I told the managers and specialists that I would like to hear some stories so I could make this story into a Microsoft Danmark story. The travelling companion would be Microsoft and the customer John.

We started with a morning exercise in which each had to tell me about his or her morning, and give his or her response to each story told. Their next assignment was to compose an "I" story based on a meeting between two or more people and a challenge; the story had to have a happy ending.

I heard a story from one of the attendees: it was about an offer made to a major customer. The customer was asking for a highly sophisticated solution for which Microsoft could deliver 90% of the support needed; the last 10% had to be developed. He told this to the customer, who was very disappointed and went looking for another partner. In the end, they made the agreement with Microsoft, even with the missing 10%.

Then we did the "first and last sentence" exercise.

### **Exercise: First and Last Sentence, in a Group**

Create a space for the storytelling performance and leave that space empty. The group members sit on chairs. Everyone has prepared a story. One by one, they get up and stand in the storytelling space.

The person who left the audience and is now a storyteller stands firmly on both feet and tells his or her story:

1. the first sentence (king)
2. silence (servant)
3. the last sentence (king)
4. silence (servant)

Now leave the storyteller leaves the storytelling space and returns to the audience. The next listener becomes a storyteller. In this way, you can hear 15 stories (or parts of 15 stories) in a very short time.

For Microsoft, I had adjusted the procedure so that everyone just had to stand up, stay in front of their chair, and tell the first and the last sentence. This saved us a lot of time, but the focus here was the wonderful fact that you only need this little to create your own story.

One of the group said that it was a good exercise, and she would use this “first and last sentence” technique next time she held a presentation, since it provides a very quick outline of what will be said. I could only agree.

Now it was time for me to tell the story “The Travelling Companion,” with Microsoft as that very character.

So I told them about a man taking a long journey that would bring him into the deepest forest, over the biggest mountains, and across the widest oceans. He needed someone to help him. And when that helper came and told him about the things he would need for his journey, our hero was warned. “This can help you to fight the dragon, but it can’t protect you against all evil,” said the helper. “I will follow you and whenever you find that your sword, your cloak of iron and your shield aren’t good enough, we will find the solution together.”

And our hero was so pleased. He had once been out in a storm fighting the biggest dragon of them all, and when, in the middle of the fight, he realized that his equipment wasn’t any help at all, he nearly drowned. With the helper at his side, he could be alert and ready, and his journey would be a good and safe one.

The story was the last thing we did in the workshop, and now I’m very much looking forward to our second meeting and hearing about developments in the story of the traveling companion.

## Chapter 6 – Revolution

# 6

### *See the Light and/or Feel the Wave*

**W**hat is light really? Is it a wave or a shower of photons? There seems no likelihood for forming a consistent description of the phenomena of light by a choice of only one of the two languages... We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, a revolution took place. The epicenter of that revolution was Copenhagen. Danish physicist Niels Bohr and a group of other leading physicists, among them a young Heisenberg, explored the particle/wave phenomenon. They tried to find an expression to describe the fact that, as an observer, you have influence on the scientific studies of the world. Your viewpoint defines the world.

I could have told them that. If I’d had the chance, I would have told them a story.

But they didn’t have a storyteller at hand, so they had to find other ways to describe the phenomenon. They used the word “complementarity.”

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics*, Copyright renewed 1966, A Touchstone Book, Publ. Simon & Schuster, New York. , pp. 262-263.

In our tradition, this is strange way of looking at things. One of the main problems with this new concept is the understanding of opposites. Heat exists because of coldness; night exists because of day; light and darkness are closely connected. One of the things we find difficult is their coexistence, the fact that the two opposites are not fighting to be stronger than each other, and that coexistence is progress, not stagnation.

*For a parallel to the lesson of atomic theory...[we must turn] to those kinds of... problems with which already thinkers like the Buddha and Lao Tzu have been confronted, when trying to harmonize our position as spectators and actors in the great drama of existence.<sup>7</sup>*

An oral story is created by the storyteller and the listener in cooperation. Listen to one of the great masters of storytelling, the Italian winner of the Nobel Prize in literature Dario Fo, when he turns the whole picture around. It is not you as the storyteller that has the leading role:

*The audience has always been my litmus paper, every second. Are you able to listen to them, does the audience conduct you like a conductor of a major orchestra? But pity that storyteller who get flattered and carried away; the audience can also be your wild horse, that throws you off the saddle.<sup>8</sup>*

### Three Secrets of Dario Fo

I met Dario Fo in 1996 when he was in Copenhagen for a master class. I witnessed 460 people in a theatre in Copenhagen conducting one man without knowing it. Every time he was uncertain, he used the power of the audience, not the power within him. And every time the audience thought they knew what would happen next, he showed them that he was ahead of them.

It was like a dance between Dario Fo and 460 minds, hearts and bodies. It is a complicated and yet simple interaction. I will present three things that I learned from my encounter with Dario Fo.

I arrived early on the third day of the master class. The rest of the group did a lot of heavy warm ups, stimulating their bodies and voices in various ways. I sat quietly on a chair next to Dario Fo, who also sat watching all the energy of these young people. Suddenly I realized that the man who was supposed to be the driver for the whole evening, the one the crowd of more than 400 people had come to see, was the man sitting on a chair with a soft smile, watching.

I asked Dario Fo if he shouldn't warm up, as I knew that the power of his voice was enough to fill the most of Copenhagen. He smiled gently at me and said: "What do you think I'm doing?"

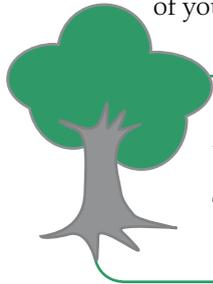
Nothing else had to be said, and I realized I just learned the first lesson. It is not about the energy that you put inside your body or warming up

<sup>7</sup> Neils Bohr, Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge, (edited by John Wiley and Sons, 1958) p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Dario Fo, Il paese dei mezaràt, Feltrinelli, Italy, 2003.

your voice, it is question of your attitude towards the meeting between this humble man and his audience, an audience he loved and feared at the same time.

If you transfer this to organizational storytelling, you meet every person with the same attitude: a humble and yet clear presence. Your warm ups could be playing with your two-year-old daughter instead of refining your latest PowerPoint slide. The story is not going to be any better because you rehearse it one hour before you have to present it to 1500 of your company's most important shareholders.



***When you prepare your storytelling, do as Dario does.  
Sit down, relax and enjoy the moment.***

Dario Fo works with something I call "economy of the body." If you are performing as one of your characters, and the next moment in your story you have to switch characters, the secret is to do as little as possible. Move from one gesture to the next in one movement and with as few changes as possible.

If you tell my story about the pea, you can act like the pea. What is it like to lie on the floor, pressed down by the heavy burden above – and then you swiftly change into the princess lying high above by saying "ouch." Can you do that very quickly?

I give you here an example as it could have happened. I don't know any stories from Dario Fo with an old man, a boy and an apple tree filled with the most wonderful apples. I am creating the story right now for this purpose.

*We are in wonderful Italy in the autumn. An old man is unexpectedly coming home from hunting. He has a rifle over his shoulder. A boy is eating an apple from the tree in the old man's yard. When the boy jumps down from the tree, he twists his ankle hard, and the old man catches the boy in the act of stealing, with his rifle still over his shoulder. Now imagine the old man shaking the boy, raising his right hand to hit him and the boy holding one hand to his ankle and one up in the air, trying to ward off a blow.*

Can you please get up from your chair? Try it out. Create the position of the old man. Imagine how the boy twisted his ankle on the ground. The old man looks down at the boy while shouting at him. The angry man raises his right hand so he can beat the boy. The boy is placed on the low right side of the old man. Now shift to the position of the boy. It should take you less than 1/10 of a second. Your voice changing, the hand in the air turns around and now it is protecting the boy from the old man's attack. Imaging how the old man is above you on your left side. The key here is the hand and the direction of the two bodies.

You can work on the conversation at this point in the story. Here is a suggestion.

The boy: "Grandpapa, don't hit me!"

The old man: "I am not your grandfather."

The boy: "Are you sure about that? Look at me; I look a lot like you. You remember how Alexandro, your oldest son, liked my mother when she was young and beautiful."

The old man: "Shut up! It doesn't matter whether you are my grandson or not. You are not allowed to steal my apples."

For the audience, the first thing they have to imagine is the old man and the boy in the garden with the apple tree. The storyteller describes it, and the audience creates the images. At the most dramatic part of the story, the storyteller starts acting the two roles. Hopefully, you as a listener are taken by surprise, and that's good. Have you forgotten the rifle? No, I thought not: you are a clever reader.



***The listener is not supposed to know what is going to happen next in the story.***

The audience is now getting the images and the dramatic actions from the movements of the storyteller. Often you start with the role with the highest status, in this case the old man.

Because you now have a pact with your audience, you can easily shift between the two roles and the role of the storyteller.

*The old man ends the conversation, but just as he is going to slap the boy, he suffers a heart attack. He is in great pain as he falls to the ground. The boy just stares for a second at the old man; then he gets up and sees that he can walk, albeit with a limp. He stops. He looks at the old man again. Then he takes the rifle and shoots it up in the air, shouting and screaming for help. Soon there is a crowd to take care of the old man.*

*Imaging the end of the story – wonderful, right? A picture of two male characters sitting in the hospital, a boy with a broken leg and an old man recovering from a severe heart attack, sitting there quietly talking to one another.*

If you look at the story, there is a little surprise for you. The rifle. All kinds of images, thoughts and expectations appear in your head when you read the word rifle. I work deliberately with that. At the end, I put a twist into the story: the rifle becomes the instrument for the boy to save the old man's life.

If this story had been created by Dario Fo, it would have been a little bit more grotesque and dangerous. I am a gentler man, and the moral of my stories is often gentle, like this one.

If you transfer this second lesson of the work of Dario Fo to organizational storytelling, you have to be precise in your actions, your goal with the story told should be clear and you can rationalize your movements to a minimum.

The third thing I learned from Dario Fo was the use of masks. He showed how these masks have characters inside of them. You just put one on, and suddenly you change your voice, your walk and your behavior towards others. Put on the mask of the Commedia dell'arte character Pantalone and turn into an old lustful man with a big ugly stomach and a voice that is rusty and dull.

If you transfer this to organizational storytelling, you have to embody the story before it can be understood. If you wear the masks of the different characters in your story, it provides your audience with ways to understand the behavior of the characters described in your story.

### **Listen While You Tell**

One of the things that my encounter with Dario Fo confirmed was the importance of each and every member of the audience. Each person creates images and understanding in an interaction between the two sides of the brain – the left analytical half and the right emotional half. Every member of the audience affects the way the story is told. Their inner “movies” affect my inner movie.

When you experience resistance in the audience, a natural impulse is to fight that resistance: put more power into it, talk louder and faster. Do the opposite. Step back, make longer pauses, invite the listeners inside. This gives the listeners an opportunity to experience a mutual responsibility for the creation of the story being told.

### **Revolution**

Here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new revolution could take place. It is up to us whether or not we commit to a brighter future.

We can choose the old one-way form of communication, leadership in the old-fashioned top-bottom way, and production with no social responsibility or environmental considerations, and see what happens.

Or we can choose another form of communication, one that includes interaction that reflects another form of leadership and is again a mirror for an organization with a high morale and a high level of connection with its surroundings, socially and environmentally.

### *I prepare*

**I** started teaching storytelling in 1994 at the Borup Folk High School. We offered our students a program with two lessons once a week for four months. I found myself in a situation where I had to prepare more than thirty lessons with theory about storytelling, practical exercises to make the students become better storytellers, and inspiration to work outside the classroom.

I realized how little I knew about the subject. At the time I had been a theater director for ten years, and my experience with storytelling was limited. So I looked around and found very little of interest.

I knew what my own main goals for the class were: to look at the basic rules of storytelling. The storyteller is influenced by the listener. The creation of an inner movie involves mutual responsibility. The new knowledge an oral story produces is a mutual responsibility. It is like a dance in which you are not 100% sure who is taking the lead.

I asked myself this fundamental question: How does the storyteller involve the listener in the creation of both meaning and flow of the images?

Could I find a daily life expression to describe this phenomenon?

When I started my classes in storytelling, I noticed that the Danish word *vekselvirkning* could be the expression I had been looking for. Here is a translation I found on the Internet:<sup>9</sup>

- **interaction** - *The government wanted more interaction with the people*
- **interplay** - *Interplay between the boss and his employees is important*
- **interrelationship** - *There is no interrelationship between the departments*
- **reciprocal action** - *They studied the reciprocal action of the social system and institutions*

The reason that I give the whole definition of the word here is that I want you to understand the importance of this expression. If you translate it just with the word "interaction," it doesn't always give all aspects of mutuality that the Danish word contains. However, we – the translator and editor of this book, Dee Shields, and I – had to do something, so we settled on using "interaction" and "interplay", depending on which works best in the context, but know that what I actually mean is *vekselvirkning*.

The students went looking for complementary relationships that showed the various aspects of interplay in storytelling.

We found at least five pairs where the mutual reaction between two complementary opposites exists. You can find more if you want.

### **Interplay Between Storyteller and Listener**

The first interaction between the storyteller and the listener(s) is the choice of story.

Try to imagine one of the listeners. What is she interested in? Imagine another listener. Who is his partner? Try to put yourself in these listeners' shoes and from that viewpoint answer the fundamental question:

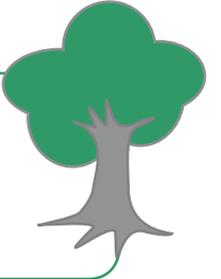
- Is the story relevant to me as a listener? If you answered yes to that question, ask yourself the next one, which is just as crucial.

Then change your viewpoint. Now you're the storyteller again.

- Are you learning something new from telling this particular story to this particular audience?

A storyteller has to be curious, must have the spirit to explore the unknown. You will be telling this story only once to these people at this time. So, as a storyteller, you are excited to learn from this new experience.

<sup>9</sup> Source: [www.ordbogen.com](http://www.ordbogen.com)



*You let us, as listeners, create meaning, images and sensory impressions.*

Stimulate our senses. It can be done very quickly by you telling about the looks, the sounds, the smells. And then silence.

If you are uncertain, be honest. Don't shout; whisper. Instead of throwing more energy at a skeptical audience, try the opposite. Give less energy. Create a moment of silence. Invite the listener into a mutual experience.

Tell us your story both as a king and as a most humble servant. It is a **complementary** movement between opposites.

When you finish your story, you are the king again. Just finish your story.

Stop talking and let the listeners speak. Don't apologize and don't ask for their sympathy. Just relax and let the listeners give their feedback.

When you search for a good story, try searching unlikely places. If you are the boss, ask the cleaning staff, if you are a mother searching for a good story, search in your own life. Do you remember your first bike? Your first kiss?

Sometimes a story needs to be polished to be a diamond, and the only way to find out if the story is a diamond is by telling it. So find someone to practice on. Ask the person: Will you please listen to this story and give your honest feedback?

Before you meet a larger audience, you should have practiced this story at least three times on three different people.

### **Interplay Between King and Servant**

You have found an opportunity. The listeners are there. You have an audience.

Before you start telling your story, you have to consider a few things. Are the listeners comfortable? Do they hear you? Can you see their eyes? What about the light? Are you standing in front of a window? Is your face visible?

Your beginning is crucial. Go straight to the story. Let us hear: Where? When? Who? You know that your story is good. Show it! Be there for the listener. In the small silences, the small pauses you make, you invite us into the world of your story.

## Interplay Between Meaning and Images

If the story just contains a lot of beautiful images and means nothing, you will have lost your audience, and they will never come back to you. So you have to pick a good story with new insights for both the listeners and you as a storyteller.

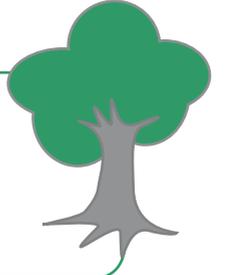
Just as important, however, is the need for clear and creative images in the story. Read the works of Hans Christian Andersen. Every story stimulates. He creates images, tells about the sounds and the smells. In this way, he activates you; he invites you to work.

My Swedish colleague Anders Granström tells about a city that had a wall around it. When he has finished his story, he asks the listeners, "What colour was the wall?" A woman in the first row saw a red wall; two men at the back agree on yellow, and soon the room is filled with suggestions.

As long as the details are irrelevant to the meaning of the story, listeners can create their own images. There are always two stories being told: the story of the storyteller and the story of the listener.

Silence is a key word here. It is in the silence filled with tension that the listeners create images.

## Interplay Between Silence and Words



*If you don't know what to say, say nothing.*

When you the storyteller are quiet, the silence is filled with tension. In the silence, the listeners create their own story. They imagine the ending; they ask if it's a reliable story; they create the images of the story; they are very active.

The silences create a rhythm, and the story is like a piece of music. Some of the parts should be told very fast; others slowly, with lots of details. It depends on the story and the only way to find the rhythm is to tell the story.

## Interplay Between Epic and Dramatic Storytelling

“Once upon a time” is a typical epic phrase. You describe the scenario. Where does the story take place? Who is in the story?

When you change your voice so it sounds like one of the characters in the story, you are dramatic. You can also change your body gestures, as long as you remember that an oral story is not theater.

It is of the utmost importance that the storyteller links organically with his or her movements, gestures and voice changes. If it doesn't feel natural, don't do it.

There has to be a balance between the epic and the dramatic elements of your storytelling.

## Chapter 8 – Interaction in Organizations



**T**he flat steppe at the bottom of the hill is filled with riders riding at a furious pace but spurring their horses to gallop even faster.

*Two men are standing on the hill. One of the men is old; the other young. They are watching two horses grazing peacefully on the hillside. One of the horses is black as coal; the other white as snow.*

*The old man says, “You are old enough now to choose the horse that is the right one for you to ride. The black horse is everything bestial and false. If you choose it, it will take you straight to hell. The white horse is truth and goodness. If you choose it, it will soon take you right up to truth’s heaven.”*

*The young man looks at the two horses, sees the black one, powerful and full of animal wildness. The young man is tempted for a short moment, but then he forces his gaze away. He contemplates the white horse, and his heart fills with happiness. The horse is beautiful and pure. He mounts it and rides out onto the steppe.*

*He spurs the horse: it’s not moving fast enough. After a while, the young man begins to wonder what’s wrong. He looks down at the flanks of the*

*horse. Its muscles are pumping hard. Then he stiffens. The horse is not white: not all white, at any rate. Its mane also contains brown, gray and yellow nuances.*

*He looks around at the other riders, whom he did not notice before. The riders aren't just triumphantly happy. All kinds of moods are reflected in their faces: happiness, confusion, sorrow, sadness, love, bitterness – everything that fills anyone's life. And their horses aren't just white; they are all different colors mixed together, and the young man feels cheated and defrauded.*

*So he turns towards those who picked the black horse, and here he sees the same picture, all kinds of human feelings in a veritable chaos of horses and people. It can't be true. The black horses should be full of lies and corruption, their riders on the way to hell. Some of the riders of black horses look more satisfied than the riders on the white horses closest to him.*

*The young man sees a hilltop in the landscape, stops his horse and walks over to it. Other riders have climbed down off their horses, and they all gather together. They sit down around a small tree and start telling stories. As far as I know, they are sitting there still.*

## **Interplay Between Success and Disaster**

A person, company or organization that thinks that only success stories have any effect had better think again. There is an interplay between these two types of stories that provides credibility.

We have become used to a distinct division between the journalistic story on the one hand – which is never positive – and the stories that are told about a business enterprise. There always has to be these shining picture-perfect advertising images that no one believes. Until recently, our world consisted of two dualistic opposites, i.e. opposites that would always combat each other. Instead, it is possible to find a balance between the two.

## **Interplay Between Management and Staff**

If employees feel they are respected as individuals and that management listens to their ideas and wishes, then they will reciprocate with respect for the company.

## **Interplay Between Company and Customers**

Don't sell a product: there are more than enough products out there. Try to get your customers to form a relationship with the company. A partner in a relationship feels much more obligated than if the company

simply considers its customers to be consumers. Remember that the best advertising you can get is word-of-mouth compliments paid to you and what you can offer.

## Interplay Between Thought and Action

If you are a leader, don't start any processes before you know that they are feasible. What if the storytelling shows that there are some work procedures that need to be changed? Is there a plan of action then?

If you are an employee at a lower level of the organization, ask yourself whether the dialog management is attempting to open is real? Or is it just a maneuver?

The problem with modern employees is that they are way too smart to be satisfied with empty promises; there has to be some substance to what management does. If there isn't, then anti-stories appear. An anti-story is a story that goes against the official story and undermines its intended effect.

## Interplay Between Truth and Fiction

This is the interaction that works for me as a storyteller in an entertaining capacity. I can tell my stories without having to be sure that I'm telling the truth. I'm allowed to do that; I'm a storyteller, not a truth teller.

When you start using storytelling as an organizational development tool, you will discover that it is not so easy to employ this interplay between truth and fiction.

*November 2001*

*Something unfortunate happened at a large-scale conference on storytelling held by author of *The Dream Society* Rolf Jensen. Up on the podium sat various representatives from the world of storytelling (which was and continues to be a highly diffuse concept: Does it mean oral or written communication, or is a journalist a storyteller, too?) Among all these smart people, there was also one who was an oral storyteller. At one point, the panel was asked whether a story had to be true, or whether, in some situations, it would be possible or desirable to tell an untruth. The storyteller answered, "It doesn't matter whether a story is true or false, as long as it works."*

It is understandable that a storyteller who works with fiction says that kind of thing about finding stories and telling them to an audience. The problem is taking the storytelling rule that fiction must be credible and applying it to work relationships. It's something completely different. The occurrence of a lie is something very serious in any relationship.

If it turned out that you couldn't trust the person telling the story, the person who is supposed to be your guide, taking you to places you hardly knew existed, then you would react strongly. You would not permit that person to take you there ever again.



*If a company is caught lying, then it will be the death of that company in the short or longer term.*

For this reason, the stories you tell either as a company or a leader have to be very carefully verified first. You have to do your research before a story can be used.

So the statement would have to be as follows: "If the purpose of your story is just to entertain, then it doesn't matter whether a story is true or false, as long as it is credible. If, on the other hand, you are telling a story at a workplace to achieve a certain purpose, then you must be sure you are telling something true."

### **Interplay Between Writing and Speaking**

Our descriptions of reality are being revised today. Our old culture, recorded in writing, claimed that some things are the truth. We've been told that ever since we learned that two plus two could never be anything but four. Aristotle and others stubbornly maintained that there was only one scientific truth and it could not be contested.

An organization based on the newer principle of interaction would never categorically claim that anything is true in a scientific, locked-in way: an interactive perception of reality works with the concept of a complex reality that cannot be encompassed by a single true and comprehensive description.

I used to think it was about making a firm choice between written and spoken modes, that it was impossible to have an interactive relationship with reality when you worked with written media.

This was before I had a wonderful conversation with Tove Vejlgard Schørring, who heads up Xact Consulting, consultants whose aim is to be IT bridge-builders and disseminate knowledge. As I already mentioned, Tove was one of the attendees at a mini-training course in Steve Denning's methods that Steve and I held in the spring of 2005. At the course, we had unblushingly claimed that it was no use writing stories down. Written stories, we said, simply did not work. Oral storytelling was the only effective way.

In the course assessment session, Tove made a reference to our bombastic claim that writing stories down didn't work. I tried to wriggle out of it. I know that Steve usually says that his experience at the World Bank was that only his oral storytelling worked. I told her I had proved that day that I could perceive the world in an oral, changing and complex way so I could give each attendee a response that matched that person. Et cetera, et cetera. I could tell it didn't sound convincing.

So I sat down and asked her why she posed that question. She explained that, in her job, she didn't have the time to tell each employee all the stories she regularly sent out into the organization, so she also used the written channels for that kind of communication.

I stared at her. She radiated a self-confidence that included two feet planted solidly on the ground, which was why it seemed so strong. She smiled and her eyes were curious yet confident. I coughed a little, and then I suddenly understood. The statement Steve and I made was wrong, although it had been true in 1996 when Steve changed the World Bank's Knowledge Management strategy without knowing anything about storytelling.

In 2005, business leaders work with their concepts in an unforced and natural way. Tove handles her reality as a leader by using small anecdotes and stories in an organic flow that matches the development of her organization. That is the method I called "oral" until very recently: now I call it "interactive," and I use that word because the method also involves the use of written newsletters, e-mails, etc. It is possible to involve other media than speech in this flow of stories.

I made the point that interaction/interplay is a principle in oral storytelling and that, by definition, a written story communicates in one direction only and thus not nearly as interesting as an oral story – that employees don't feel the same shared responsibility as they do when they hear a story told aloud.

Tove explained more in depth in an e-mail: "At Xact, it is vital that there is interactivity in the storytelling, because Xact is a virtual workplace. By virtual, I mean that there are rarely more than a few of us sitting in the same place physically at the same time, since our consultants visit many different customers on a daily basis.

"Of course, the storytelling is oral when we meet (staff and consultant meetings and social activities such as plays, concerts, etc.), but also written, in our weekly news communication, to which everyone at Xact contributes last week's 'stories,' descriptions of their situation, problems, or just sports news (for fans). It's all very nice, and it helps connect us all of us that work for the company together. In practice, we are exchanging information, often wrapped up in informal stories. For Xact, the things that are important are identity, loyalty (both ways) and having an idea of what is happening with all the different employees, who again need these little stories about what goes on at the office when they are out in the field.

"It's interaction, and it works, but written stories can't stand alone, of course."

## A Trap

Let me try to explain what I meant when I claimed that stories can only be told aloud, or at least mustn't be rendered static and unchanging. What follows is a fictional story. As a storyteller, I am imagining a hypothetical reality. Any resemblance to reality is on purpose.

The members of the management team of a large company are all in agreement that they need to gather together all the company's stories. The company, just like all other organizations, is filled with stories about how to apply its corporate values. The stories are collected (a big expensive consulting firm spends a lot of hours on the assignment); the stories are written down and published in the form of a beautifully printed book; and a reception is held at which the authors hold a speech. The consulting firm sends a surprisingly large bill.

You can almost hear the poor CEO: "There were so many good stories, you know, and now we have them in a database that can support the implementation of innovative processes and promote our narrative competencies [blah, blah, blah]..."

The book of company stories now stands where that type of book is always kept: on the shelf.

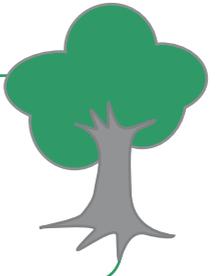
No one working at the company uses the book. No one at the staff meetings reads aloud from the book, and there's not a living soul that has time to learn how to access all the little nooks and crannies of the

database. It sounded like such a good idea: "Whenever we want to do something about cooperation and working together, then we'll just read the stories about cooperation aloud." Not going to happen.

The project of finding new stories should have been the core process of the project, since it is exactly that interactive and organic process that makes stories an asset in organizational development.

A strong side of oral storytelling is that stories are replaced the instant a changing reality requires new stories – without it being necessary to invest prestige or money in the project. Written stories, in situations when they function best, can then support this process.

***Stories are not static products: they are living organisms.***



**W**ashington, D.C., 2006. Golden Fleece, a loose network of storytellers, consultants and businesspeople in Washington. A young consultant has signed up for my workshop to find stories that show the power of storytelling. My presentation at the Golden Fleece seminar is more or less the same as what's in this book. It's something completely new to the Americans. The content really makes them sit up and listen; the room is filled with energy, and new knowledge emerges.

*After the workshop, the consultant is not satisfied. It turns out she wants to tell about her own experience with the power of storytelling, not other people's. I criticize her for not taking the opportunity at the workshop, while we were working with the stories. She smiles evasively. I tell her that this moment will never come again. Then she looks up at me with the most amazing eyes and asks if I would work with her stories now.*

*We run around a little, looking for a place where we can sit. We end up in some oversized armchairs in the middle of the lobby of the activity center where the seminar is being held. She tells me she's left the safe and secure world she knows. She was active in volunteer organizations, where, among other things,*

she saw Native Americans solving conflicts by telling stories. She saw how storytelling could be used to reach agreement on important issues. Now she will be working with some of the big players in the American corporate sector and is a bit nervous about it. She doesn't think her stories will hold up. I listen to one of the stories that she intends to present for these business leaders.

I stare at her, horrified. The woman sitting there is deadly boring, no sparkle in her eyes, and she's saying something that sounds most of all like homework. I interrupt her and tell her that I think it's one of the most boring things I've ever heard. She stops and looks at me, horrified. She thinks I mean the content of what she's saying. I wasn't thinking of the content at all; that will come later. No, I'm thinking of her face, her eyes and her body language, all of which very clearly indicate that it's not her personality that's there, only what's going on inside her head. She is pure will, nothing else, and that is deadly dull, let me tell you.

I tell her there are three things she has to remember when she tells a story:

1. Tell your story because you can't stop yourself. You are so filled up with what you want to say that you simply need to communicate it.
2. If you don't know what to say, then be quiet. Storytelling is not so much the words you say. It's more all the words you don't say. Some people call these "pauses." It is an unfortunate description, because what happens to the audience is not that they are put on hold: quite the contrary. It is during these short pauses that your audience is invited inside your story.

3. Feel your feet: if they are not planted firmly on the ground, I won't be able to feel your story. I will understand it, perhaps, but it's a poor effort if you just use a small part of your brain, and it's really also disparaging me as a listener if you only appeal to that ridiculously small part of me.

She tries to be the good student and does everything in her power to follow her teacher's advice. I'm still bored, so I stop her. I steer the conversation away from this task that she clearly has way too much respect for. At one point in the conversation, we laugh. Suddenly there's life in her eyes, and she feels great again. So I'm blunt: I tell her to take that energy she now has and put it into the story. She looks at me with surprise, but she's at least starting to understand. Then something happens. She does it, very slowly and quietly, tentatively. She sits with both feet solidly planted on the ground, throws her hair back and begins.

The change is amazing. The story flows, and there is now life in her eyes. I look in wonder at her hair: the light plays on it now, with a glow that definitely wasn't there before. Once we've cracked the code, the rest is easy.

I hear three of her stories and draw the following conclusions:

- When you lay the foundations for a story, you must be as brief and clear as possible.
- You must be one with your story.
- Telling a story should first and foremost be a delightful thing to do.

When you have to respond to a good story, you should

1. use the clearest image you can.
2. tell about something you liked about the way the story was told.
3. say what it was you learned from the story.

### **The Danish town of Ollerup, 2006.**

I am speaking to a group of teachers at private independent schools all over Denmark, telling them about the above conclusions.

At one point, one of the teachers tells me about a boy named Anders who hates the oral storytelling class. The teacher shows how Anders' body language indicates that he hates the class. She also shows what her own reaction is: She stands in front of him, friendly and inviting him to participate, on her toes leaning towards him, and tells the poor boy that of course he can tell the class something funny about the little mouse that is the subject for the day. She gets a negative reaction.

I say, "No darned wonder," get up and get her to sit down like Anders. I stand in front of her and show with my posture, my face and my voice that I am inviting her to participate.

She says I seem threatening, and I tell her that's how Anders feels, too. He sees a person about ten feet tall. There's nothing about the situation that gives him a clue about any way to resolve it. Instead of standing in

front of him, I ask her to sit beside the student, looking forward, towards possible solutions to his problem, and then see whether he can think of anything funny the mouse can do about that cat. When she does it, she smiles and says she'll try it when she gets home.

I get up in front of the group of teachers and draw their attention to the fact that they just saw interaction in practice.

### **Shakespeare and the Voice of a Student**

I remember back to the time I taught at the Borup Folk High School, from 1993 to 1999. I have to note that I probably didn't make much of an impression on my students, and I wonder how I could have done it better. One of the things that strikes me now, eight years later, is that I didn't use storytelling as a teaching method. Instead, I did as my colleagues did: made copies of written material, gathered it into a compendium, and asked the students to read certain pages from it before each class.

The few times when I could see the students really got something out of it was when they were able to bring their everyday lives into the class.

Once, when we were discussing William Shakespeare, I had collected some material about a group of people who think Shakespeare must actually have been a nobleman. Shakespeare's writings are full of literary references and for this reason could not have been written by an uneducated son of a glove maker. One of the students, a bit of a tough

guy from the island of Amager near Copenhagen, was sitting like he always did, looking down at his desk. When I had finished the lecture I had prepared, he mumbled something I couldn't hear. I asked him to repeat it. "It's because those learned gentlemen don't know crap about what happens on the street."

I stared at him. Here I had prepared a long and very scientific explanation in which I could compare the collectivity of the Middle Ages with the individualism of the Renaissance. But instead, I let the student tell us about what it's like to sit on a park bench, have a couple of nice, cold beers, and listen to all the self-appointed professors who can probably give you an answer even if you don't ask them a question.

I think the others knew what we were trying to tell them: that Shakespeare doesn't primarily point forward towards a beautiful and shining Renaissance, but just as much back towards a just as beautiful and shining Middle Ages. He was simply extremely good at picking up the pearls of the street talk of the day.

I said thanks to the student for his contribution on his way out of the classroom. He nodded and went to the lounge to have a smoke. I was evidently quite welcome.

The guy from Amager was interesting, and he had his own distinctive opinions and thoughts. It was a treat to hear him tell about his experiences and put them into a greater context.

## A Story Starts A Conversation

*When I was a kid growing up, we were terrified of the Russian dominists and their atom bombs. We knew it was just a question of time before one went off.*

*One day, I was sitting up in a tree in the part of the property we called "the jungle." Suddenly, the heavens were torn asunder by a huge flash of light. I sat there, completely paralyzed. Then came the sound of a blast. I bolted home to my mother to tell her that we had to get into the bomb shelter now before the Russian dominists came. She smiled and said it was the Valby Gasworks that exploded. I went to my room, somewhat disappointed, and looked at my stamp collection. I felt as though those dumb dominists had fooled me.*

*When I tell this story at schools, it suddenly puts a face on the "cold war" concept: the young pupils recognize the anxiety, and a conversation about the concept of "the enemy" can begin.*

*A personal story appeals to your sense of getting a story back. School students can recognize something in the story, and a new story is born. When you use storytelling in teaching, then you must be ready to listen.*

## Continued Conversation

When I tell stories, I am myself. I cannot hide behind a part, a stage prop or some other kind of "noise." I stand alone before my audience and have to believe that they wish me well. Most do.

If they don't, then I'm happy to turn down my energy level and become even more intense instead. I constantly switch back and forth between being king and humble servant.

I can tell stories in a gym, of course. I also have some black sheets we can hang up, and I have some animal sounds from Africa to manufacture exactly the right atmosphere. But, seriously, I prefer to walk around a school, enter a classroom and tell a story. Once the story is over, I move on to the next classroom. It's a concept we call storytelling raids.

### **Storytelling Raids**

Monday morning, May 16, 2001. The Klostergårdsskolen school in Lund, Sweden. The following was taken from some diary notes I wrote about our first storytelling raid.

The black wooden buildings are spread around in the flat terrain. The children arrive, dragging their feet, two and two or alone. They walk directly from the schoolyard into their classrooms and sit down heavily in their chairs. School starts.

When it is five past eight in the morning, we three storytellers meet out in the schoolyard and wish each other good luck. Then we move in on the unsuspecting students. I knock on the door. The teacher has been warned, but pretends to be surprised by what's happening. Hun says, "Come in," and I position myself in the middle of the room. I look

around to get a sense of the energy in the room. The kids are suspicious. Who is this tall guy? Did we do something wrong?

When I start telling a story, their faces change slowly. In a normal class, it's mostly the left half of the brain that is activated. Storytelling spreads activity to more parts of the brain. Their senses are stimulated, and the students give themselves over to forming their own images in their minds. Their eyes come alive as they travel on the seven seas with Sven the Sailor. They shiver at the thought of the Devil's Cat on board the ship.

When the story is over, I say thanks for listening, and move on to the next class to be raided with a story. When we meet in the schoolyard at recess, we see nothing but happy faces turned towards us.

The kids have all talked to each other during recess, so each class I "raid" after recess is already warmed up and ready. They lean forward with an expectant look in their eyes, and it's time for me to start the story.

***“There are three stories the leader needs to communicate: Who am I, who are we, where are we going?”<sup>10</sup>***

I read these clever words and began wondering: Why is everybody talking about storytelling as a leadership tool? What is leadership? It is top-down or bottom-up? And it made me realize that I had to construct a metaphor that everybody could relate to.

*May 2003, King’s Garden, Copenhagen. I was going to tell stories under the branch of a wonderful red beech tree close to Rosenborg Castle, built in 1606 by the Danish king Christian IV. It was a warm evening, and the sun was low. It was amazing. The beautiful sunset just behind the tree, the castle standing there all red with the sun, and already there was a little crowd.*

*The tree was standing as if it had been waiting for this annual event. I jumped up and touched the lowest of the branches. I told the tree that we were going to tell stories like we had doing for the past seven years. It was as the space between the grass and the branches of the tree filled itself with expectation.*

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<sup>10</sup> Noel M. Tichy: The Thought Leader Interview By Randall Rothenberg from the website <http://www.strategy-business.com/press/16635507/8458>.

The audience was approximately 80 people: some young, some old, but all with listening ears and open hearts. It was a magical evening.

After we finished our storytelling, I had the picture of the tree inside me while I drove back to my suburban home. I went to bed but couldn't sleep. So I got up and made a drawing of the tree.

Then I thought about the division of stories into three categories and put them on the tree. Before you turn the page and look at the tree that I made that night I would like you to draw a tree of your organization. Use the blank page opposite this.

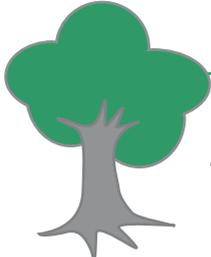


Take a look at your tree and ask: Is your workplace grounded? Do the roots – including yourself – get enough nourishment from the soil so the tree can grow to become a majestic and beautiful tree? Is there something wrong with the trunk, the values and the ways things are done? Remember, the trunk is holding up the top of the tree!

Imagine spring. On the tree there are these small green buds holding the future. How do you feel about the future of your organization? Imagine autumn: now there is fruit all over the tree. What are the possibilities in your organization?

That is the funny thing about a metaphor: you can ask quite difficult questions. But if you ask them metaphorically, it is not that dangerous.

### *My tree*



*Truth and fiction work together interactively.*

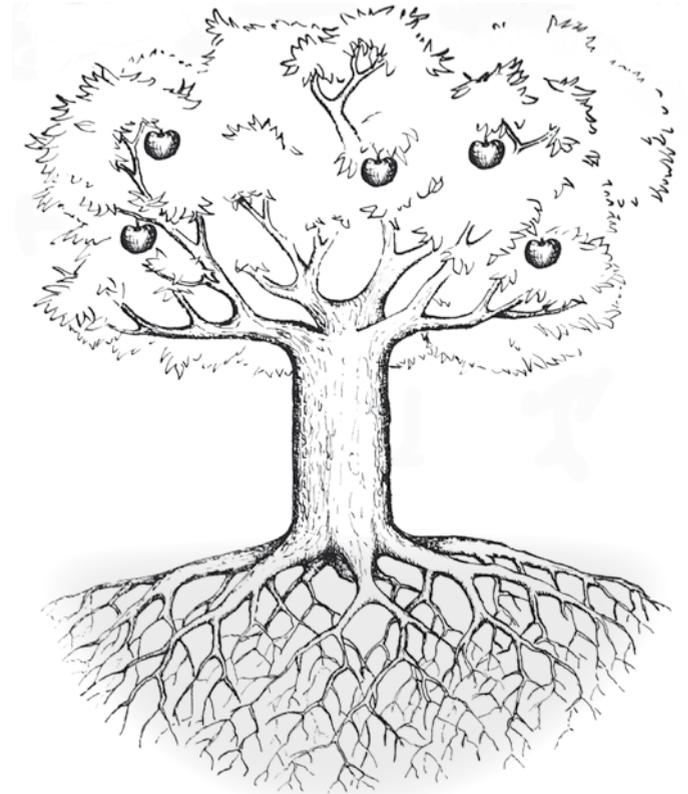
Every metaphor has strengths and weaknesses. You can't create a picture that holds all the different elements of real life.

One of the things I like about this metaphor is that it is organic. Your workplace has an organic flow, of information, of goods, of decisions, etc. It changes all the time. That is one of the major challenges today.

Other good things to be said about a tree as a metaphor for an organization:

- Everybody knows what a tree is.
- The water flows from the roots all the way to the top.
- If you don't take care of your roots, give them water, and take care of the soil, you will find that the tree will die.
- Much of the tree is hidden below ground, and it is best for it to stay that way.

- The trunk holds up the top of the tree.
- In the spring, the tree is filled with buds.
- In the autumn, it is filled with fruit (if it is a fruit tree!)



## "I", "We" and Future Stories

There are basically three kinds of stories in an organization:

- "I" stories: the roots of the tree. Every person in the organization is important and every voice should be heard. Some of these stories should stay hidden under the surface.
- "We" stories: the trunk of the tree. Stories that create identity. Values become alive in these stories.
- Future stories: in spring it is the green buds soon to become leaves on the tree and in the autumn it is the fruit or seeds on the tree. Specific ideas for change, of what the immediate and long-term future will bring to the organization.

A healthy organization has equally many "I", "we" and future stories, and balance between the three categories of stories depends on the nature of the challenges.

Stories are born, have their own life and after a while they die – new stories arise, or old stories are reborn. Your workplace is an organic place, so the stories of this organic place need to have an organic nature. Trees require soil, air, water and light. Stories require people, time, presence and relevance. I like the metaphor. It creates new insights. It has weaknesses. A tree is immovable. A tree can't eat another tree. But all in all, it isn't the worst metaphor I have heard to describe what is going on in an organization.

## Roots in the Ground: "I" Stories



You tell "I" stories at the coffee machine, at lunch, in the cafeteria – at all the informal meetings you have in your daily work. These meetings tie human beings together.

The stories belong to every single individual, and organizations just have to accept their presence. A lot of pressure can be relieved at these informal meetings.

The stories are invisible, and a lot of power is hidden there. The secret is that they only stay powerful if they stay underground. The stories often concern things that are close, something you worry about, or something that brings pleasure. These "I" stories are informal; they show ways of doing things.

I have created such an “I” story. I am not sure whether or not it is true, but I am sure of one thing. It could be true.

*A secretary is late for her lunch with the other secretaries. When she arrives, she is furious. A telephone repairman had arrived at 9 am and told her that it would only take one hour and that she wouldn’t notice him while he was working.*

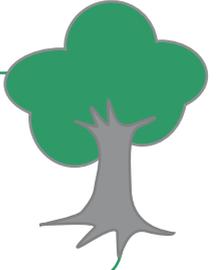
*“He is still in my office and he has been talking to me all morning. I’ve had to answer all kinds of idiotic questions about our telephone line, and I haven’t been able to do any proper work.*

*“And the worst thing is, you know my son David, he is going to play baseball at four. I was in a hurry before, now I am in a total rush. And if that stupid telephone man just could have told me in the morning that he would be here all day and that he needed me there to support him, you guys could have helped me with some of the work piling up at my desk.”*

*The other secretaries provide her with all the support she asks for. They run through her projects, and after a while she calms down. She laughs and says, “Men!”*

*One of the new secretaries is listening carefully. A lot of information is hidden here, and she will act according to it.*

Are you able to find the hidden information? And what did the new secretary do after this incident? If you have any suggestions, you are welcome to e-mail me, and I’ll put the suggestions on my blog.



**Stories act as examples.**

### **“I” Stories to Create Trust**

I would like you to listen to me. One of the ways to make you really hear what I am saying and not just politely nod your head up and down is to tell a story from my life. I will send you back to the early days of the sixties, where the Russian and the Americans raced to see who would be the first to send a man in orbit.

The Russians won that race. In 1961, the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was the first man to fly a spacecraft. His flight lasted less than two hours, but it was a major sensation in those days.

In February 1962, John Glenn was the first American to orbit the Earth. He spent four hours in space.

*At 8 pm local time on February 20, 1962, a crowd of people had gathered on a bridge in my suburban hometown 15 kilometers from Copenhagen. It was a cold, bright winter night with glimmering stars.*

*My mother, who was from Norway; my dad, a blue collar guy with big hands from the countryside of Denmark; my sister, five years older than me; and me were standing on a bridge looking up at the stars. There was a total of about 40 people on that bridge that evening.*

*I was afraid of the bridge because of the steam train passing by underneath. If you were standing on the bridge when a train passed, you disappeared in smoke.*

*I was cold and frightened, but I didn't dare say anything to my dad. He was excited and held my hand real tight. It hurt a little bit. Then he yelled, "Look, son, there he is!" and pointed up in the sky. I wasn't looking up because he was so enthusiastic at seeing one of the stars moving fast across the sky that he squeezed my little hand, and this time the pain was too much for me. So I looked down at the ground and started crying. My mother mumbled something, and the two of us left the bridge, leaving my sister and dad pointing up into the black sky.*

*When we got back to our apartment my mother told me to go to bed. I heard my father and sister come back to our little two-room apartment. They were thrilled. A man from our part of the world, not one of those Russians, travelled around in space, and it was possible for us down here on the Earth to watch it – it was unbelievable. I heard the voices from the living room, and I lay in my bed, feeling little and useless.*

*Suddenly everything was quiet in the living room. The door opened, and my father and sister quietly came in and sat down on my bed. They said they heard from my mother that I was sad. I looked at them, puzzled.*

*My father had a newspaper in his hand. He asked me if it was OK to show me a picture of the astronaut. The name of the astronaut was John, like that of my best friend, and I said something about his haircut because my friend John had just cut his hair in a very short hairstyle. I was right. John the astronaut had short hair. When we saw the pictures from the spacecraft, a lot of questions were raised. Where was the toilet? How can he eat with his food flying around? We had a great time imagining how daily life would be on a space ship.*

*When my father said "Goodnight" to me and my sister, I thought that I was lucky to have someone saying goodnight to me. I didn't know whether or not John the astronaut had a son, but I knew that if he had, no father would say goodnight to him that night.*

*"I" stories show a number of values and attitudes that give the listener an opportunity to ask, "Are these values and attitudes important to me? Do I approve of the communication offered here?"*

*"I" stories are easily told because you were there. You don't have to imagine anything – the images, the noises, the smells – you just have to recall it. The story happened in the past, and it is your job is to make it come alive again. Reality is a source of never-ending inspiration.*

One strange thing: You have to check your story. Even if it is your memory you have to ask about the details: Was it winter? How long time did he stay up in that space ship?

### **"I" stories are easy to tell because**

- It's easy to recall. You were there; now tell us what happened.
- You know the people you are talking about.
- The sensations created in the moment have to be re-created, not invented.
- You catch the attention of the listener in a second.
- Listeners weave their own story into yours.
- You reveal your way of life, and you find recognition in the response from the listeners.

### **"I" stories are hard to tell because**

- You lose yourself in distracting details.
- You are overwhelmed by the emotions in your story and forget about the structure.
- It is so much fun to tell stories from your past that you forget their purpose.
- You get too personal.

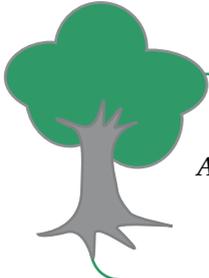
### **"I" Stories for Teambuilding**

My colleague Anders Granström and I held two workshops in 2001 for a group of people that didn't know each other. The attendees were leaders from the local government administration. We held a workshop on Tuesday and another with the same content with the other half of the group on Wednesday. People had to sign up for the workshops in advance. The organizers were disappointed because of the low degree of interest in our workshops, and we were put in one of the smallest rooms at the congress center where the event took place. We had 40 people attending our workshop the first day and expected 50 at the second.

Our workshops followed the lines of this book. The basics of storytelling, images, "I" stories and a lot of interaction. The first workshop on Tuesday was a success. Especially the "I" stories were fun.

The second day was a shock to the organizers. There were nearly 100 people when we closed the door. They were sitting on windowsills, on the floor, on the tables stacked at the opposite end of the room – everywhere.

One exercise was to describe a room that you felt comfortable in when you were a child. I will never forget the picture of these managers sitting on the floor telling each other's stories from their childhood.



*A story from your life should be personal, never private.*

### **"Oops" Stories**

We do not need to focus only on successes. On the contrary, remembering only part of the past only makes us poorer. It is legitimate to tell about the "oops" mistakes we make: they happen to all of us.

In the beginning, this causes a great deal of uncertainty. Ethics rules should be introduced for this kind of work: we are unleashing very strong forces when we do this. After a while, however, we can see that it doesn't hurt (all the time) and that it is an effective way to share knowledge.

*2002, Copenhagen, an office worker in a group of four.*

*I have instructed them to tell a story where they succeeded and one story where they failed. The other members in the group listen to the success stories and write down all the things that could have changed the story to an "oooops" story. And when they hear an "oooops" story, they write down all the things that could have changed this story to a success story.*

*The woman starts her "oooops" story by saying that the rest of group has to promise her never ever to retell the story to anyone. They accept, and of course expectations run high.*

*After the story is told, the disappointment from the others is palatable. "I can tell you a story about something I did that was worse than what you just told us," said one of the others.*

The woman telling the first story had never before admitted she had made a mistake. Poor woman! Everybody makes mistakes, and if you can't admit it, the "oooops" story turns into something you can expend a great deal of energy trying to control.

Very few organizations dare show their "oooops" stories to the public. I can only remember one organization telling about an employee making a mistake and learning from it.

The story is from Danish toymaker LEGO. LEGO published a CD with stories, "The Lego Spirit," in 2001. LEGO's HR department had gathered stories from all over the world; the purpose of the CD was to show that LEGO's values were alive. Already today, in 2008, that CD is a piece of history, the LEGO Group having moved on to other strategies for their employees.

I had the CD sent to me in 2001 and heard all the stories. There was one story that caught my attention: it was so different from the rest. The other stories on the CD were all about how fantastic LEGO's products

were and how LEGO employees were filled with good ideas, etc. This story was different for two reasons. First, the person in this particular video clip was authentic in a more profound way than the people telling stories of their successes. The story the woman told was about a major ‘oops’: she was from the U.S. in her mid-50s. Here is the story:

*A couple of years ago when LEGO DUPLO came out with the Winnie the Pooh product, we had to check that the boxes contained the right pieces. At this particular time I took ten units and used my knife to cut the master cartons and taps on the boxes. When the inspection was all done, I packed up and re-taped everything, and it went back to the line to be shipped out.*

*Some time later, I realized that my knife was missing. I asked a colleague Elaine if she had seen it, but she hadn’t. So I tried to retrace my steps: I looked on the floor, I went through the garbage, I looked in the restroom. But I couldn’t find it. Then it struck me: Could I have lost the knife in one of the DUPLO sets? The thought scared me.*

*Immediately I notified Nancy, who works in the distribution centre, to put everything on hold so that nothing would leave the warehouse for the stores. Then I notified my supervisor, Andrew, and together we went up to the distribution centre and started looking through the boxes – one by one. After opening about 50 DUPLO boxes, we found it. The blade of the knife was open so if a child had put his or her hand in there they could have been seriously hurt. It made me sick to my stomach.*

*Since then we have started attaching little bungy-cords to the knives, so that your knife will always come with you. It’s always attached to your person so nothing like that can happen again.*

I watched the video again when I wrote this book, and my wife looked over my shoulder. She liked what she heard. “This is good,” she said. “This woman is honest, and she learned from her mistake. People don’t often admit that.”

### **“I” Stories Become “We” Stories or The Official and Unofficial “I” Stories**

Another way of categorizing the “I” stories is as official and unofficial “I” stories. The “I” stories you hear at the coffee machine are most often unofficial, but the stories of the single individual being a hero can change and become an official story for the company to use for various purposes such as attracting the best people.

The use to which the stories are put can change. Deeply buried “I” stories not to be heard by the public can change into stories that reflect the values of the workplace: so-called “we” stories.

The next story was used to give inspiration to a group of nurses’ aides. The self-confidence of the group was low. One of the consultants at the hospital told these women a story, and the question is: Is it an “I” story or a “we” story?

*This consultant was a princess when she was a child. Every member of her family protected her and acted like she was unable to help out with the housework. The girl never saw that as a problem.*

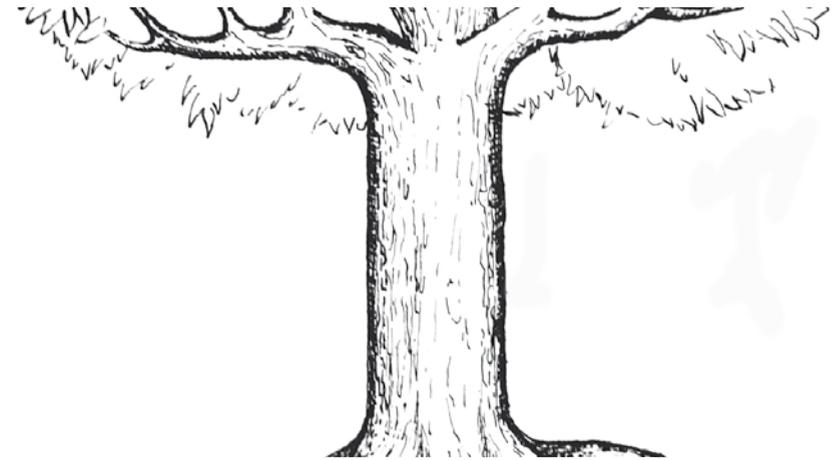
*At the age of 18 she travelled to England and got herself a job as a au pair. When she came home for Christmas, the whole family was gathered together, and she was asked if she could tell about her life in England. She told them about her first day at work and all the things she had to do: take care of the little baby and his three-year-old brother, the laundry, etc.*

*Her family stared at her and asked, “And what did you do about that?” She told them that she handled all these duties, and the family was pleased with her efforts.*

*Her family didn’t believe her, and she realized that she would have to work hard to change their picture of her being a princess.*

When the consultant tells this story it has a strong impact on the audience because she is standing right in front of them. Look at me, she is saying by her presence. And they look at see this wonderfully strong woman that changed her own perception of herself and thus changed that of others as well – an example to follow.

## Trunk of the tree: “We” Stories



### Three “We” Stories

*September 1, 2004: City Council of Copenhagen. Firefighters are very conscious of their team spirit. A fireman tells about how the group of firemen heard that a widow of one of their colleagues had problems with her yard. It was spring, and there were so many things to be done. So the group of firemen went out to the suburb where she lived.*

*They had a wonderful day together, and the yard looked really nice when they sat in her kitchen after a good day’s work. She gave them a beer and a thank you – the latter was unnecessary.*

*October 2, 2005: northern Denmark. The leaders from a small town administration, a group of leaders from the kindergartens in the town, all the school leaders, the town parks manager and others gathered to find the soul of the little town. I had asked them to take some pictures and show them to us.*

*It was great fun. There were more than 100 photographs of children playing in the sun, roses to be cut, beautiful sunsets over the fjord, etc. And every one of these leaders told stories why they were proud to be doing what they did from those photographs.*

*March 3, 2006: Copenhagen. A firm of consultants in growth. Our workshop is about values, and they have been working in groups for two hours trying to find stories that reflect their values. One of the girls in the kitchen gets up and looks around. The group of consultants looks at her in anticipation: this is a new voice.*

*She is a little nervous. They help her. The girl from the kitchen starts telling the story of a former colleague that the managers suspected of having drinking problems. The young girl was a new employee at that time, and she was astonished at how the management helped that poor woman. They offered her help and paid for a stay at an alcohol rehabilitation center.*

## Characteristics of a “We” Story

“We” stories

- are all the stories that show your workplace is different from everyone else’s.
- are carried by the values of the workplace, and the stories nourish these values when they are told.
- can be something that the group in question is proud of.
- can be something that the group is not very proud of.
- can be about a threat from outside and how you as a group confronted the threat.

The stories have to flow within the organization, not just from the top to the bottom, but also from the bottom up.

## Values in Play

A mid-level manager from Danish insulin manufacturer Novo Nordisk told about a process of formulating the corporate values of a production unit. The values were supposed to be something people should always have in mind; they were to be identified by the people who were to use them, and everyone in the unit was involved in this identification process.

She said, "It was a unique process because the person who was in charge of finding these values was our site manager's secretary. That was unheard of, that it was a secretary who would be figuring out what values our business unit should have. I think that it actually helped with respect for the values, though, that it wasn't just something laid on us from above. It was something we were supposed to do together, and a secretary could just as well be good at coordinating the process as anyone else.

"It was a good process in which we were divided up into groups. Everyone had the opportunity to have their say.

"Our values are the same as those of our parent organization (and that's what many object to about the values: that they're the same ones everyone in the organization has!) But I don't have the same attitude towards the values of the parent company because I didn't help formulate them, even though both sets of values use the same words. For example, the word 'accountability' means much more to me as one of our values because I was part of the process."

## The Fruits of the Tree : Future Stories



## Two Springboard Stories

*It is around lunchtime, and it isn't until the air saturated with the smell of the spicy meatballs and hot chicken reaches our nostrils that we suddenly discover we're hungry. There are 15 of us from different organizations on this day in June 2001 attending a workshop with Steve Denning, former World Bank director of knowledge management and author of the book *The Springboard*. Lunch interrupts intense and exciting work being done. We had gotten our money's worth this morning; that doesn't always happen when you take a course.*

The program consists of two parts. The first part was Steve showing slides and telling us how he single-handedly transformed the World Bank's knowledge management strategy by using a kind of story he calls "springboard stories."

We understand that springboard stories show the opportunities of the future through specific examples from the past. I nod. As a storyteller, I know that the past, present and future merge in an oral story.

Two of the springboard stories in Steve's tale are central. The first story is ultra-short, almost a non-story: sixteen words about a health worker in a little village in Zambia that couldn't find information on malaria at the World Bank's Web site.

The second story is more complex. Steve's slides show us the story of a highway engineer in Pakistan who went looking for information on a problem they were having with the construction of a highway. He received his information from all over the world much faster than normal because he was part of a virtual network.

The above were two examples illustrating Steve's idea for change in the World Bank was – that it should become a knowledge bank – and two examples that showed the effect that a springboard story should have: immediate action. That's why it's called a springboard story. It makes people get up and do something.

Steve claims that the two stories were enough to change the way ten thousand employees looked at knowledge management. After an hour of lively PowerPoint presentation, we believe him. Even though the guy claims he's not good at telling stories, what he says is credible. We are with him when he claims that the stories dramatically changed this huge organization that didn't want to change. He is his own example. He is authentic.

The reason springboard stories have an impact on people is partly due to the nature of storytelling. Future possibilities are described in a way that gives the audience an opportunity to create their own ideas, to become involved in the realization of an idea for change in a way that no other communication tool can achieve. One of the secrets is the link to the present. "What if" or "just imagine" are the key phrases.

### **Changing of The World Bank and Borup High School**

It is 1995, and Steve Denning is working for the World Bank. I am a teacher at the Borup Folk High School. A folk high school is a uniquely Danish institution of adult continuing education, often with boarding students.

Steve is on his way up the career ladder and ends up heading the African Region. I direct a large-scale theater project and am working on a cultural exchange project with the Danish Red Cross cultural centre. Steve's boss leaves the World Bank, and Steve is demoted. The general

crisis in the folk high school sector is worsening: we don't have as many students as before.

Steve is asked to look for information. I find myself at a crossroads. How can we attract students to the school?

Steve realizes that the World Bank will have to change: it must become a knowledge organization. I find some of my old notes from the first time I taught storytelling and wonder whether students at the Borup Folk High School in 1995 perceive interaction as a central principle.

To change the primary focus of the World Bank, which was to lend money, Steve tried different approaches: arguments, bar charts, diagrams, numbers – none of it worked. Then he began to tell stories. That worked. One of them was the story of a highway engineer who needed information.

It is 1996, and there is a problem in Pakistan with a highway. It is a problem that needs to be solved very quickly. The normal procedure is to write a report, prepare budgets, etc. That would take at least three months, and the highway engineer needs an answer immediately. So he sends an e-mail to the people in his network, a loosely based network of people with the same interest: highways. Within a week, it turns out these other people have lots of experience with exactly the problem he faces. There is a book being written in Argentina on the subject; the South Africans have already tested various solutions and will send their results; and there is more. Instead of the normal three months, a solution

was found in the week they had to fix it. Because his network worked and because the knowledge was there and in play, it was possible to solve the problem. And then comes the magic word in this kind of story: imagine.

Imagine if the knowledge that an organization holds could always be open and available. Imagine the advantages of knowledge sharing. This triggers the little voice in their heads that turn story listeners in to active participants in the process of changing reality that the story describes. The ten thousand employees of the World Bank changed course partly due to the stories Steve calls springboard stories.

To get more interaction at the Borup Folk High School, I began to tell the story of Sara and Knute. Knute was an unskilled worker working for a bricklayers' firm. He was about 50 and a little different from the others in the class, but they liked him. He was honest and told you what he thought, plain and clear. Sara was a punk rocker who wore big military boots that somehow always had soil in the grooves of the soles, so she was constantly shedding little bits of dirt when she walked.

One day after lunch, I see Knute come into the lounge to smoke. He sees there is this empty seat beside Sara. As usual, Sara has flung her big boots up onto the table and looks as though the world is her oyster. Knute doesn't really want to look at her ugly boots, so he walks over to stand by the window. Then he lights up his cigarette, looks at her boots again, and makes a decision.

He sits down beside Sara and tells her to get those boots off the table. Sara turns toward Knute, quick as lightning. She's just about to give him the finger, or maybe both of them, but then she sees it's Knute. Her fingers are frozen in sort of a half-way-up position. Then she grins, says something like sure, she can do that, and she starts chatting with Knute. They talk about the philosophy class coming up, about Jørgen, a guy they both like, about life.

At that point in time, I hadn't yet met Steve and didn't know the significance of the magic word "imagine." So I never gave my colleagues (there were ten of us teachers) the opportunity to activate that little voice and create change. My colleagues were never convinced that the cultural encounter illustrated by my story was true of all the students at the school, that it was the foundation of folk high school life: the interaction between different people.

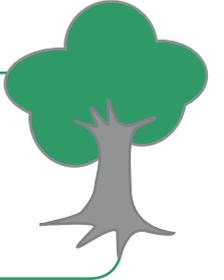
Today, this is exactly what companies and organizations are looking for. They don't want employees that are clones of each other. Diversity generates energy, and friction generates warmth.

Steve Denning left the World Bank in 1999 to become a storyteller. The World Bank was named one of the world's ten most admired organizations in 2001.

In 1999, the Borup Folk High School fired me because there weren't enough students. Danish folk high schools are still in a crisis, also because they did not understand the message in my little story. The interaction

between different cultures is not about putting Chinese students and Danish students in the same class; it is just as much about people that would not normally encounter each other finding a place where they can meet and exchange experiences, dreams and thoughts. This place could well be the folk high schools.

***Let this be a warning: Stories about the future involve a preconceived idea of the future, so remember to use "just imagine" or "what if".***



Another thing the story could teach us is that it is your position that determines the effect your story will have.

### **Springboard Story: A Secretary in change**

*The year is 2004, and we are in the old royal city of Roskilde just west of Copenhagen. A group of medical secretaries are gathered together to talk about the future. They are a threatened profession. New technology is gradually making their jobs obsolete, so it is important they take up new challenges and change professional tracks. I had been contacted by their labor union to put together a workshop that will help them think new thoughts.*

*I start my workshop, introduce myself, introduce storytelling as a profession, and then divide them into groups of two and ask them to tell each other stories.*

*A little later, when I ask who wants to get up in front of everyone and tell a story, no one volunteers. I notice, though, that there are two women, about 40, sitting next to each other having a good time. One of them keeps giving the other little playful pushes, as if urging her to go ahead. So I ask this woman if she would like to tell a story. Her friend gives her a little push again, and she says okay. I ask if she wouldn't like to come up here, where I'm standing. No, no way, is the reply. So I let her stay seated where she is.*

*She tells us that she works as a secretary to a number of doctors at the Gentoft county hospital. One of the senior doctors came up to her one day and said, "I'm in charge of a Web site about a certain illness that I'm an expert in; you know that."*

*Yes, she knew that.*

*"It takes me much too long to administer the site. Would you want to help me out with some of it?"*

*And then she said two very wise things: 1) "It sounds very interesting," and 2) "I'll have to get some training so I can do it properly." He said that would be fine. The instructor of the Web design course she took was excellent; he helped her and gave her the support she needed, also with the site itself.*

*Then she looks humbly down at the table in front of her and says, "I must be doing an okay job, because now there are three other doctors asking me if I can do the same with theirs."*

*The room goes completely silent. No one wants to say anything, and who needs to after a story like that? It is crystal clear that this is what we had all come here for. She dared to say yes to a new challenge, but she also dared say yes in a way that was not just an acceptance; she demanded something from the change she was offered.*

This has become my favorite springboard story because it invites direct action: if she can do it, so can I! Her humble attitude towards telling the story made all the other medical secretaries want to take action themselves.

**F**or the past eight years, I have made my living from telling stories and nothing else, and on my tax return it says “storyteller.” I’m one of the few professional storytellers in Denmark.

Does that mean, then, that unlike amateurs, I don’t like doing what I do? Or does it mean that I am quite seriously claiming that I am better than others at telling stories? I’m not sure. I do know that I love my job.

And I know that all my time is spent becoming a better storyteller, creating new stories, arranging events at which people can experience storytelling, and trying to fit storytelling into different contexts such as companies and organizations.

To get a bit closer to the answer to the question of whether I am a better storyteller than the people who don’t get to write “storyteller” on their tax returns, I would like to tell a story from real life.

For eight years now, I've been organizing "Stories under the Beech Tree" events at which various storytellers tell their stories in their own way. It is the best possible setting: the Royal Gardens, with Rosenberg Castle the backdrop. The storytellers stand under a wonderfully beautiful old copper beech tree.

An interesting thing about "Stories under the Beech Tree" is that the tyranny of the target group has been abolished: all kinds of people like to enter the gorgeous gardens; enjoy the sun setting behind the castle; drink a little of the thermos coffee, wine, Bavarian beer or soda pop they brought with them; and listen to stories for two hours. It is an event that builds bridges across cultural chasms: there are punk rockers, executives, students, senior citizens, and more.

### **The Lady with the Bike**

One Sunday in May 2007, I had invited an unknown storyteller from Aarhus that I get along with real well. We tell stories that are happy and just a touch erotic, inspired by Dario Fo, among others. The mood we create is a really good one.

I am finishing up my stories when I notice a woman who has been standing, leaning up against her bicycle for 15 minutes or so. She smiles playfully, a little mischievously, and I recognize her as one of the regulars.

She says loudly that she's been here many times, and that she didn't really have time this evening, but if she could just tell a story, then she'd be on her way. Naturally, I accept, smiling, and sit down. The woman is leaning up against her bicycle, standing, while she tells her story. It is a story about her grandson, who threw a ball out into the pond just behind where we're sitting. Everyone looks at the pond. Well, then the mother of the boy sits down and paddles in the water to bring the ball to her. Once the child gets hold of the ball, he wants to throw it back in the water.

I look around me. The lady is not a very good storyteller, judging by storyteller school standards. Her voice is much too low; she speaks in a monotone; and she tells the story without rhythm. Still, the audience is rapt. They love her and carry her to the climax of the story, which is maddeningly exciting. Will Mom and Grandma save the ball? They do. Phew. The story is over, and the lady with the bicycle nods friendly and bicycles away to get to her appointment on time.

I must admit a certain envy. Here I work myself to the bone finding good stories, refining them and doing eye, voice and body exercises every day, working to become a better storyteller, and then some lady comes in from left field and says, "Excuse me, but could I..." and the audience listens to her with their hearts on their sleeves, disappearing far into the story, completely with her until the last breath – a story that wasn't really even a story.

Everything depends on the context in which a story is told. These listeners felt they were partly responsible for the project succeeding as well as it did. They helped create something wholly unique.

For me, this is the most important lesson to be learned from storytelling, and this is why it's going to be the one of the most important communication skills of the future. The storytelling approach to communication reflects one of the basic facts of life:



***If you take part in creating the possibilities of the future, then you are committed, and you will do what it takes to get there.***

So if you want to work with some of these methods at your workplace, you have to ask yourself whether or not you are ready for the changes that the process could generate.

The people at your workplace have to ask whether they are ready to accept storytelling. In their encounter with storytelling, they will discover that it generates new energy and releases a lot of pent-up energy. It is so simple. Tell a story; listen to one. Feel how it gives you pleasure and extra energy. It makes you want to change reality. Do it!

When everything gets back to normal, do you have an action plan?

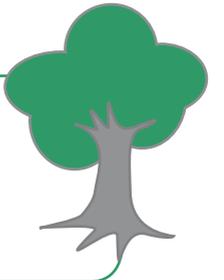
When your subordinates have specific wishes to the future, do the resources necessary to implement these wishes exist? On the other side of the equation, are your subordinates ready to meet the resulting obligations?

In this book, I showed you how a storyteller thinks and works. Now it is up to you to take these experiences out into the real world, and it will be up to you to get the two worlds, organization and storytelling to connect somehow.

Go out there and face your challenges. Create a connection between stories and actions. Tell us who you are. Be honest and set goals that are desirable and reachable. Stay on course when the storm comes. Create clear and simple images of the opportunities and challenges your place of work offers.

Easier said than done, you say. I know. If you dare to use stories in the specific situations you encounter, you will discover that it works, but you will have to be committed. In this book, I have tried to give as clear directions as I could; now the rest is up to you.

***Get out there and tell a story!***



*'That is the interest of this book. To storytellers who are interested in making such a journey from storytelling into organizations. And to managers and people in organizations who are wondering whether there is anything in storytelling that is of relevance to business.*

*The book points out matters of profound interest to both the world of storytelling and the world of organizations.*

*In writing it, Svend-Erik has done a service to both worlds, and I hope you find it both educational and entertaining.'*

*Steve Denning*



Svend-Erik Engh

*Stories are an inviting communication - at the same time it is a tool for leaders and people working in projects. The author describes the storyteller as a 'king' or 'queen' in the castle and at the same time the most humble servant.*

*Storytelling is a way to exchange values. Storytelling gives a way to create clear pictures of the future, the visions – and to describe the culture on the working place. It deals with both left and right side of the brain.*

*To be told a story creates a unique sensation of collaboration. It is a magic moment, when the world disappears, time stands still and the listener is part of the story told.*

*Svend-Erik Engh from Copenhagen, Denmark is a storyteller known for his ability to connect entertainment, education, and corporate understanding. A noted Danish performing artist and experienced workshop leader. He has been teaching storytelling for 20 years, in universities, high schools and in business. He teaches at the University of Gotland.*

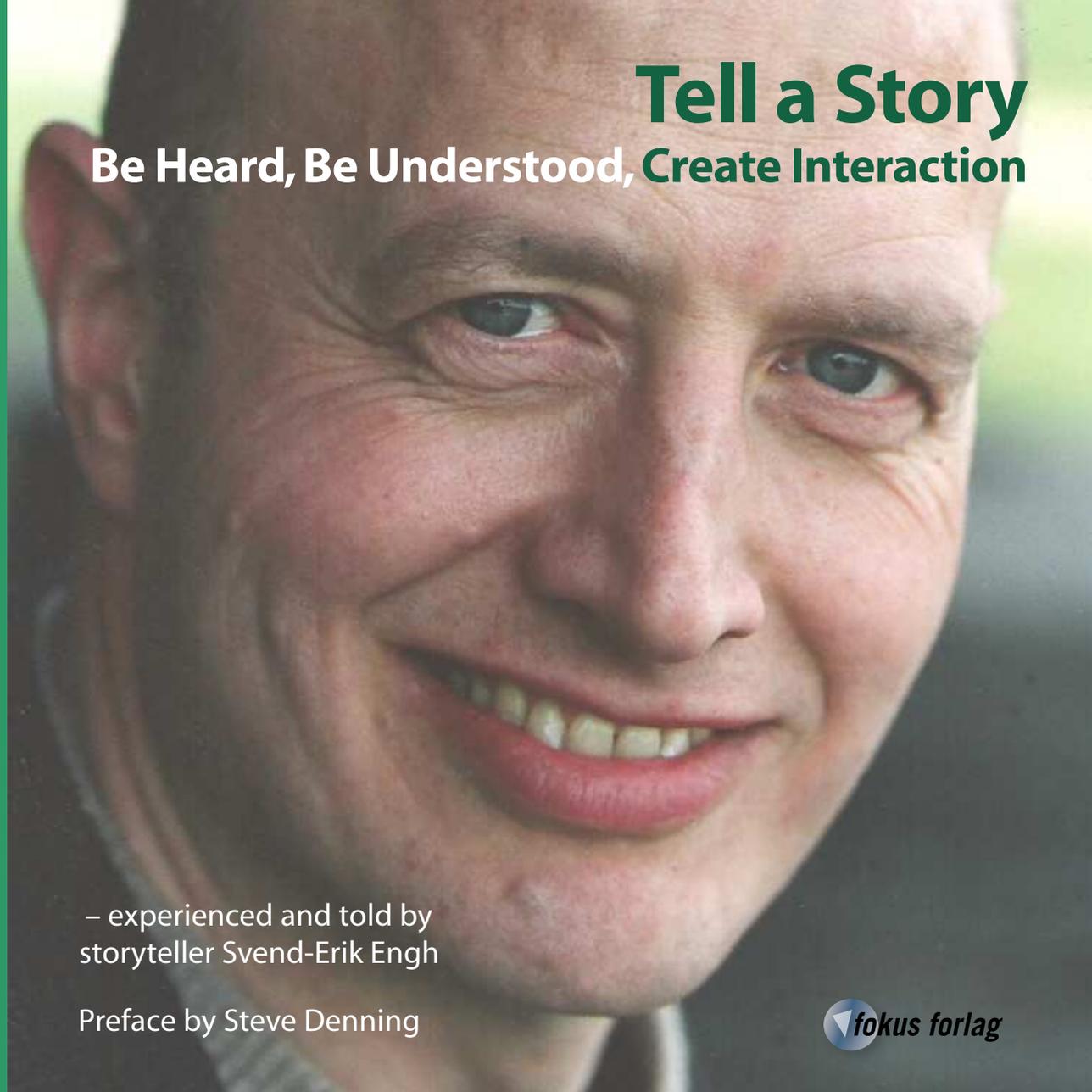
*Mr. Engh is the coordinator of the annual Golden Fleece Group's Storytelling in Organizations Conference at the Copenhagen Business School, Denmark.*

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# Tell a Story

## Be Heard, Be Understood, Create Interaction



– experienced and told by  
storyteller Svend-Erik Engh

Preface by Steve Denning

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