

IV-14 Tales Explore Meaning

Story tellers embroider to explore the logical space of perceptions. It succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities and eclipses contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story. Whatever is its overt purpose, it can not avoid a covert exercise of power: Narrative inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others.

In all cultures tales have evolved and adopted as a means of portrayal of human aspirations in relation to the patterns and events of life. Since something is always lost in the translation of thought to words and standardization of meaning, tales encourage playful explorations. Without becoming too self-referential, as a means of self-discovery and self-expression of a culture every tale is a cross-section of the whole. As an artifact of representation it facilitates grasp of the whole with some imagination. With variations on a theme of common motifs, family ties, personality types, cultural niches, attendant traditions, world-views and contexts tales illustrate more complex concepts. Tales explores philosophies through webs of psychological and social meanings in play with the questions of illusion and reality. In such as play, wisdom received as a neat conclusion is not just unwise, it is usually wrong.

Playing and imagining build on a well-articulated sense of reality. The process of exploring the alternatives follows from choices. It tends to minimize, if not eliminate, arbitrary decision making. It is a journey where the imaginary and real worlds are explored - often without an ad hoc priori. In this world one can

outdo Wonder Woman who might be having *a bad hair day*, or excel Superman down worrying about the miserable state of world. The consequences of such actions can be explored by identifying different and probable variables.

It is not surprising that at least for the last five millennia travelers have carried tales to far and distant lands, and continue to do so through the electronic medium. Many of the ancient tales and fables that moved along the ancient trade routes are homogenized and adopted in different cultural contexts. The phenomenon is apparent in movies and TV shows, where it is not clear if they have the staying power except for the marketing.

Deeper connections. Concerns of enduring tales find deeper resonance across geographical, cultural and historical boundaries. Therefore, redundancy in terms is necessary for exploration of the meanings of complex terms like behavior, success, roles, rational, love, life, objective and moral. It is only a matter of time that in the end of this personal journey, or a guided tour by the narrator, one decides to relate and quantify the variables to develop propositions for the relations intrinsic in the observed behavior.

We weave levels of meaning beyond their superficial plots - the first level of meaning. Deeper levels of meaning are not the domains of only intellectuals or transcendental reasoning. Accessing relevant meaning does not necessarily require wading through long, obscure, and complex discourses. Without resorting to proverbs on moral virtues, tales can be entertaining at the superficial level while encouraging playful and open-minded exploration of many levels of awareness when the ideas and concepts are left for the reader to discover. As a teaching-tool and mental exercise, tales can perhaps help to counteract some of the over-structured limited thinking which all too often characterizes the mind nurtured on canned laugh and mushy plots.

Cassandra's curse: Despair of knowing future. It is said that the Sun god Apollo fell in love with beautiful Cassandra, the youngest daughter of the last king of Troy. She was given gift of seeing future for agreeing to love him. When she could not love him, Apollo asked her for a single kiss. As their lips touched, Apollo breached into her mouth that *no one would ever believe Cassandra's prophecies*. Her warnings of Greeks attacking Trojans and about soldiers hidden inside the Trojan Horse were not heeded by Trojans. When asked by Greeks near the end of the War, she foretold of a palace murder and her own death before the end of the day. It also came to pass.

All the same, it continues to be so with most insights about the future course of events. As for an ending, this anecdote juxtaposes optimistic tendencies against the backdrop of pessimism that pervade aspects of human condition: *Many claimed to have found the ultimate truth, yet the present remains murky and the future in doubt*. Trust (accountability and responsibility) is the issue in dealing with prophecies and forecasts.

Tales are for the sheer joy of representational activity that helps in inventing characters, managing dialogue, and controlling narratives so as to assure maximum effect with an acceptable level of consistency. One develops a sense of connecting and combining episodes to build subsequent forms of play without overt sense of winning, losing, and justice. Active interaction dissociates drudgery and boredom from creative interpretation of literature and other life situations. In such playful activities the only prerequisite is that all players understand the substitutions, roles, and themes that are involved. The subsequent discussion is an attempt to mobilize resources and then negotiate the arrangements (matrix) satisfactorily.

In many traditions tales based on anecdotes and parables cajole the listener into thinking without offering solutions. The force of the story-telling genera comes to its zenith in the episodic Epics that celebrate plurality of view-points while leaving the task of drawing a conclusion to the listener. Like a good play, this device leaves the message at the discretion of the audience. Yet the approach directs thinking by gentle coaxing and pointing a way. This universe of sensibilities and sensitivities intertwines the personalities of the characters of the story with that of the listeners. An appreciation of such cross-currents requires nimbleness of mind because the process is characterized by a flow of thought, rather than driven by a message. A river cannot be captured: If dammed it loses its identity. For such reasons attempts, intellectual or otherwise, to capture the essence of the flow of conscience from most traditional cultures remains diffuse.

Some of the experiences that follow from interactions with tales are outlined below.

Exploring the cognitive space. Search for meaning in tales develop or parallel emotional and intellectual growth. We can not pretend to be playing and imagining unless we have a well-articulated sense of reality. Tales are about launching what might initially appear to be a simple anecdote. In the more sophisticated realm of the tale we need a gentle hint to channel thoughts to grasp the deeper meaning. The reward of the revelation is an understanding of the tale at a much more profound level. That revelation is the key to unlocking the potential of the human mind through tales.

Climax is not necessarily the conclusion. We do not yet understand what children understand in the stories of others. Like canned-laughs, short and trite proverbial or moral endings are often contrived for brainwashing and indoctrination. A tale is

meant to be continuously and indefinitely evaluated as training for responsible adulthood. What might have once been a quaint story can become an aid for maturation, a metaphor for lofty ideals, a problem solving technique. Discussion provides an immediate feed-back at an unconscious level to the many latent themes beyond clever plots, word play, bizarre characters, exotic action, struggle between good and evil. As long as we do not know how we learn, there are very few better ways of accessing the meaning of experience.

On being lost in a combinatorial jungle. A sense of connecting and combining episodes teaches creative interpretation of literature and other life situations. The task is not just a matter of detecting this association and distinguishing it from that association. Soon one learns the concept that the possible number of logical outcomes rises rapidly even if one starts with few simple events. To deal with such situations first one must devise way for reducing redundancy. It requires knowledge of the associative structure of a body of information. For resolving signal from noise it is necessary to factor in thresholds of values, culture, apathy, along with versatile and creative guessing as well as correct and efficient guessing.

Beyond the cold logic. There are many aspects on which one does not have intuitive grasp due to developmental or individual differences: such as the joy of literary exploration; pleasure of playing with imaginative characters (imaginary worlds, wishful solutions, imaginary friends); a level of psychological reality associated with personality traits; imagination and associated willingness to loose oneself to play and relinquish control of impulses; taking risk in relationship with others. Through tales we learn that characters can change, conflicts can be resolved without removing (*terminating*) an entity, what makes a character

tick, ways to deal with power, appreciation of the underlying motives that may not be the same as the stated intentions, distinction between pretence and fantasy. Other elements of rational decision-making include appreciation of conflict, role of players, payoffs and rules. Such choices make one think about what to do rather than let chance decide as one learns the distinction between rational and irrational solutions.

Modes of thought. Then there is value in imagining whole new worlds. What might initially appear to be a simple anecdote can be launched into the more sophisticated realm of the tale. A skilful narrator may provide a gentle hint to channel thoughts into that realm in order to grasp the deeper meaning. Revelation is an understanding at a much more profound level. The subsequent ethical behavior depends on our choice of values, criteria, notions about rationality, and the sort of relationship between the playmates. These are not strategic choices that may bestow advantages in a particular situation. These are choices that we make because of the way we view ourselves and the world including the other players. If the outcome does not lead to resolution - it allows us to consider other than the strategic modes of thought.

Life-long learning. Tales have great staying power in the memory of the individual. They continue to provide guidance at several levels and evolve with each success or failure. Longer the time since the original telling, more motivations creep into recounted tales. Everyday sheds a new light on the tale, and opens a different door to perception through discussion. Ultimately, we learn to appreciate limitations of many of our cherished notions such as, every problem has an answer, or there exists the *best* choice among the courses of action. Growing collection of shattered illusions brings forth the power of rational analysis to

aid instruments of cognition to reveal the nature of the situation we find ourselves in. Even though the experience may have nothing to tell us about how we ought to behave in a particular situation, the subsequent ethical behavior depends on choices of values, criteria for evaluation, notions about rationality, and the dynamics between the players.

Durability and staying power of tales comes from universal motifs, structures and taxonomy. Like a good theory, worldliness derives from the supernatural and mythical. Yet as a means of self-discovery and self-expression tales provide a matrix of identifying the personal concerns which come together with the motifs in the climactic moments. At the cross-section of every tale, where the whole can not be grasped directly, with some imagination the motif becomes representative. Significance of the unintended events lies in the way the opportunity is used. Magic of fairy tales relies on sudden change of state as a way to explore the local or particular. Such spontaneous symmetry-breaking is random yet the consequences are chaotic, that is they exert the influence of that small bias or preference over a large number of successive events. Such insight into methods of doing things calls for scrutiny of the existing practices as well as the possible worlds.

Cultural imprints. In all cultures tales have evolved as medium of expression with flexible boundaries (jokes, myths, ballads, legends, epics). Their web of psychological and social meanings has great staying power in a culture where they evolve as transmitted through generations. Tales have durability even as they pass from one culture to other. Although the key elements remain at the root, diffusion of tales and fables through a culture or mixing of cultures is reflected in the changes. As a means of self-discovery and self-expression of a culture tales provide ways of identifying the factors that may be regarded threats to personal

values, religious standards, or esoteric preferences. Biased interpretation of tales is also a hallmark of missionary and colonial agenda. Such filters of alien values are apparent in versions of ancient tales recounted by Anderson and the Grimm Brothers.

Ancient tales are playful in that they place no moral judgment. Emphasis in a tale is often on the process of getting to the end rather than the end itself. In the end there are no ready-made answers - only more questions. There are no winners and losers - only survivors. It is the job of the storyteller to protect the innocent and down-trodden - at least as a form of poetic justice. Individual judgment of the listener may incite discussion to entertain levels of meanings. The messages are implicitly woven with the choice of culturally relevant characters, words and situations. Their significance in terms of possible assumptions can be gleaned only with careful perusal and playfulness that places no moral judgment. Rather than the end, the emphasis in a tale is on the process of getting to the bottom of ones own cognition and comprehension.

No ideal solution is to be construed. The meaning is not distilled but comes from a participatory creative experience. At the end of such a journey each reader comes out different and at a different point depending on the personal experiences of life.

Room for Doubt

Preface

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