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Dear Reader,

Stories... stories... stories. Stories in the news, that shape reality. Stories in books, that inspire imagination. Stories at bedtime, that plant new dreams. Stories in the movies, in gossip columns, in letters, in songs, in artifacts, in signposts, in whispered secrets, in family albums. Stories shared, insinuated and hidden. Stories advertised, crafted, or inadvertently divulged. Can you imagine your life without stories?

This month we are featuring an interview with Storytelling expert Jo Tyler. She shares with us how storytelling is alive in organizations and how it can help us to better understand their strengths and opportunities.

Enjoy the reading!

(And if stories inspire reflection, I invite you to visit my new blog entitled LEGACIES - <http://isabelrimanoczy.blogspot.com/> and post comments if you so wish!)

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"The most erroneous stories are those we think we know best - and therefore never scrutinize or question."

*Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002)
American evolutionary biologist and historian of science*

LIM NEWS



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Storytelling

An interview with expert Jo Tyler

LIM News: *What is storytelling?*

JT: There are quite a few ways to think about it. In the more popular use in organizations, the idea of storytelling is related to performance, the stories that are told to the employees and to the public. These are stories that plan, sculpt, and craft. In my first study, in 2004, I referred to this sort of storytelling as strategic storytelling, a process of connecting stories to a particular goal that you, as a practitioner, want to achieve in the organization. This interpretation of storytelling in organizations is perhaps the most common one. People tell how they became CEO, how they founded the company, solved difficult problems, invented a new product or process. These kinds of stories get told in naturally occurring events like training classes, or product launches, on boarding processes or annual meetings. The stories are systematically embedded in these events, often as a sort of centerpiece.

But there are other interpretations of storytelling in organizations. The one I think the most about has to do with stories as threads that are woven into the organizational fabric. They actually make up the fabric of the organization. At the same time, the organization is constantly generating more stories; more threads are entering the loom. So there is a way in which stories fabricate or make the organization, and a way in which the organization makes stories, produces them in the course of producing its goods, information or services.

I also make a distinction between the story itself, and the 'telling the story', by which I mean the way we narrate the story. The story is the story, but it may "get told" in a variety of ways. Stories have an energy, a quality of aliveness, which gets pinned down, narrowed to one lens, the lens of our experience, when we tell it. Storytelling theorist David Boje talks about "narrative's prison," the idea that the story can be trapped in the way we tell it, blocking off alternative ways of telling the story, especially as others hear the telling of the story and take action based on their understanding of it.

When we work and interact with each other - this creates stories. We may feel like we "own" the stories, because we are a protagonist, but since these stories have their own energy, they can work their way through the organization with or without us. Stories take on a life on their own.

LIM News: *Can you give an example?*

JT: Well, we all know how the grapevine works, right? We may not want a story to spread through the organization, but it does anyway. It can spread like a wildfire. We might try to shut it down. We could try spreading a counter story. We may want to stop the story, but sometimes no matter how hard we try, we cannot. If there is a story that wants to be told, to be heard, it operates on and as an energetic force.

LIM News: *Do we all have different stories?*

JT: Sure. So of course, we all have different experiences that we story in different ways. But we may also be actors in the same story, we may share it as it unfolds, yet tell it in very different ways. Maybe you tell it as a hopeless tragedy. Maybe I tell it as a dark, ironic comedy. We still share the experience but our narrations will be very different. There are as many ways to narrate as people

talking about it, actually more than that, since we all have choices about how we will narrate, what we will leave in, take out...

LIM News: *This seems to make communication and alignment very challenging.*

JT: Yes, but also what it opens is the idea of the organization discourse as deeper than what we experience on the surface, and it opens the idea of discourse as active. Stories come from action, are action, they create action.

Alignment is interesting to me. I think alignment is a double-edged sword. Let me talk about the edge that can hurt, that can do damage. Stories are not just told by the people in the organization. The organization tells its own story. It is the story that the organization wants to tell about itself to employees, customers, suppliers, stakeholders of all sorts. It's the dominant story, and not all the stories in the organization - the ones that come from the people associated with it - are in alignment with this dominant story.

LIM News: *It sounds a bit impersonal, intangible... the "organization tells, wants..."*

JT: There are many ways for the organization to speak. Some examples are the annual report, the vision and mission statements, the operating principles, logos. Even their architecture: the layout of the physical building, the website. All these things are rich with stories. For example, an alternative energy organization puts plants in the lobby, a fountain with fish. They have set this up to tell a story connected with their business, which is all about sustainable solutions. So they created a living environment right there for stakeholders to see, to educate them, or remind them. Most corporations have photos or art in their lobbies, statues, awards, or other objects telling their stories, expressing their values, their philosophies, their intent.

LIM News: *What about the difference between the talk and the walk? It is nice to hang posters declaring values, but is this the "true story"?*

JT: That is precisely the point. What are the stories that are not told, that contradict the dominant story? What stories are being silenced, pushed to the margin? All too frequently, we hear of organizations whose espoused values can be very "green" - like my example of the firm with the fish in their lobby - but their practices are not so clean and green. When the emergent stories in the organization gather steam in the margins, they poke through the dominant story. Then we read about those stories in the media - a whistle blower, a leaked memo - yet another narration of these stories. These other stories that are in the organization, but pushed to the margins are what I call the shadow stories. They can have tremendous power, in fact more than the public ones.

LIM News: *Why?*

JT: I think there is a sort of principle of pressure that the stories obey. Think for a moment: what happens when we pressure people to do something they don't want to do? Over time, the pressure builds up resistance, and again, over time, that resistance can become energetic itself, and organize. So you will find that oppressed people organize - they strike. When dominant stories are impenetrable by the emergent stories that counter it, the same pressure can build up. The stories will poke through and in that release of pressure the stories can conspire, inspire, to shape a new story, the story of a strike, an overthrow, a restorying of the dominant story. They can act against the best interest of the organization.... which may be a very good thing.

LIM News: *That sounds very provocative. Can you say more about how going against the best interest of the organization can be a very good thing?*

JT: Well, I mean "best interest" in quotation marks. When the dominant story of the organization is contrary to the greater good, then it's important to have the dominant story challenged by the

marginalized stories. We all have heard stories about good employers doing community action that supports the dominant story. But these same employees know the organization's discriminatory practices, controversial pay practices, labor practices, environmental practices. You name it. When these stories poke through and become public knowledge, it forces people to change.

LIM News: *Do you mean that these shadow stories are like regulation devices?*

JT: Maybe, yes, like the valve on a pressure cooker. When it heats up, it's got to release. But depending how forceful the dominant story is, it could corrupt the thermostatic nature of the valve force it to stay closed for some time. But the more pressure that builds up, the more violent will be the release of energy. Wait a long time, and it's not a poking through, it's a blow out. When a shadow story comes out in to the light, it invites others to emerge along with it. They have a way of organizing and reinforcing each other.

LIM News: *How is storytelling used in organizations?*

JT: I want to caution about the term 'use'. It is associated with making stories into a tool, a quick fix and it opens the door to using stories to manipulate people in ways that may not always be in their best interest, to coerce them. Of course "using" stories to persuade is not uncommon. It is very popular in field sales organizations for example, where we train the sales force to tell a particular story that can convince the buyers to buy. It becomes a problem when the message does not serve the best interest of the listener.

LIM News: *But if we all tell stories all the time, when does it become manipulation?*

JT: If I am listening to a sales person, I know that the story they tell me has been shaped to sell me. So I am to a certain degree prepared, alerted. But what if I trust the teller and the story he tells me is not true, irresponsible? That, I think, is manipulation. It has to do with context. When we are conditioned to believe the stories we hear on the job, because believing them lets us keep our job which lets us feed our kids or keeps us off the streets, the storytelling becomes manipulation. Whenever there's a conflict between the intended affect of the story and the best interest of the listeners, well, I think there are red flags all over.

I try to help organizations see these red flags. It's different than telling stories. It has a lot to do with approaching storytelling as story-listening. Organizations can listen to find their own stories, the organic stories, often unheard, unseen, that are emerging in the organization all the time, dancing with the dominant story. Being absorbed into it when they are aligned and pushed to the sidelines, unheard unseen, when they're not. I want practitioners, managers, leaders, to hear those stories, to hear how they're told, and to explore why they matter.

LIM News: *What is the value of this?*

JT: Language shapes organizations. If you only hear and understand the dominant discourse, the public stories, you will not be able to understand why things are happening in your organization. You will not notice that there are stories that are flowing below the dominant story, in an undercurrent that is shaping events in ways you can't see, or describe, though you will almost certainly feel them over the fullness of time.

LIM News: *Organizations are already chaotic, and people in them try to organize the natural chaos with processes, agreements, policies, and stories. From what I understand, you are talking about bringing more chaos?*

JT: Well, I am not at all convinced that it is really good to 'organize' the chaos...There is a way to look at stories as a means of understanding chaos, of making meaning from it, learning how to move with it, instead of making more chaos, or trying to deny chaos...

LIM News: *Would it be similar to implementing an organizational climate survey?*

JT: It works on one level, as an analogy. When you begin to listen to shadow stories, as with a climate survey, you are initiating an inquiry and are prepared to find out things that are not rosy - and you do it in order to acknowledge them, to address them in some way. However, storytelling is not implemented through a survey, because questionnaires tend to be reductionist and storytelling seeks to be expansive. You don't reach the stories through a survey. You can't.

LIM News: *Can shadow stories be good sometimes?*

JT: Yes. Good stories get pushed into the shadows by the dominant story all the time. I call them shadow stories because they're in the shadows, not because they are shadowy in a negative sense. Sometimes the public can detest an organization - everyone can think of some public or commercial institution they think we'd be better off without - yet inside that organization there are stories of wonderful things happening, people supporting each other, working creatively (often in opposition to the dominant story), but because of their context those stories don't get told in public. They persist in the shadows.

LIM News: *Do negative stories attract more attention?*

JT: Let me ask you, what is negative, what is positive? We love the shadows... the media gives more attention to marginal stories. Money is made more easily by telling stories of suffering. The idea of Appreciative Inquiry is based on David Cooperrider's notion that we are attracted to positive energy. That we turn our faces to the sun, but I don't think it's the whole truth. We love the sun, but we also love looking under the beds, into the closet... that's why we go to scary movies. And if the untold stories feel negative, but can in an ironic twist help to shed light on new solutions, are they really bad?

LIM News: *Are you saying that there are no such things as bad stories?*

JT: I think that "un-manipulated" stories are always good, because they always reveal something. They are always a catalyst for meaning making, even if we don't like the meaning. They help us understand what's going on. Of course, there are stories that make us angry or sad, but they are as good for us as those that make us happy. Any story can catalyze action, or shift it, or affirm it.

LIM News: *Talking about manipulation, I recall one mediation session I attended at Harvard Law School, where they divided us into two groups. One was the Executive Team and one was a group of young employees. The Executive Team talked about the young employees' ideas as "clueless, inexperienced, subversive" and the young employees group referred to the executive group as "old fashioned, Jurassic, outmoded". The words we used to refer to each other made dialogue impossible. So the facilitator asked us to change the wording to less judgmental terms. If I understand you, this would qualify for manipulation?*

JT: Well, not in the way I was talking about it earlier, because in this case the facilitation was openly expressed, disclosing the intent. You have choice, and you know the consequences of the experiment. And there is in what you say here the important variable I mentioned earlier of intention. You're choosing language to open dialogue, not to press another into servitude or oppress them in some other way. But I like the example. It demonstrates an aspect of what I referred to earlier as narrative prisons, a concept from David Boje's work: Once we tell a story in one way, it conditions how others and we will respond, we live it out, we react. Change the language, as your facilitator invites you to do experimentally - and the story will change, the way it gets lived out will change. One value of storytelling - of exchanging stories, listening to them - is precisely that it allows us to discover that there is another way to tell it. We can change the choices we make, choose new words, imply new meanings, and when I reframe the story, I need to know what I'm doing. Those are my choices. But I still can't choose how the listener hears my story. I can only increase the odds that my meaning will

be misunderstood.

LIM News: *If storytelling is not a tool, how do you use it?*

JT: We teach people how to pay attention, how to notice stories, to compare different stories, find where the gaps are. This helps individuals understand what is already happening. Then they can start to think about it, make choices, perhaps choices that will restore the organization. For example, we will give them instructions to go out into the organization with the sole purpose of listening for stories, seeking them, noticing them. Not to interpret, not to fix or judge. Just notice.

LIM News: *Who are the people that would go out?*

JT: It's great to send out intact teams, folks working at the strategic level of an organization, the "C-level" people, or their direct reports, who are interested in broadening their perspective of the organization, understanding it more deeply. They go out and talk to people, asking questions. They notice the stories in the architecture, the layout of the offices and cubicles, the equipment on the shop floor. They notice the artwork. In one organization someone came back with a story about the carpets how the pattern indicated where individuals could and could not go. When everyone comes back from this sort of expedition, they begin by sharing some of the stories they experienced.

LIM News: *How candid are the employees when the managers are asking questions?*

JT: It depends on the organization, the context and the person. It's not always easy work. Stories can be elusive. If they have been pushed to the margins, they don't just waltz out in front of a person who is perceived as an oppressor. You need to learn how to discover, to hear them. We talk about the need to create spaces where stories can be told safely, without further oppression or negative consequence. Also, we go out and seek stories, as outsiders. We can often hear stories that insiders wouldn't be able to elicit, or wouldn't be able to hear for other reasons.

LIM News: *What do you do with the collected stories?*

JT: They come back and share the stories they have found. We help them explore the meaning, the gaps, what the stories tell about what is working and what is not, where there are tensions. We want to find where there is tension and synergy. As they listen to each other's experiences, to the stories they encountered, there can be a lot of surprise that so many different stories can emerge from the same place, and how different they are from the stories they expected, the ones they knew before they went out to listen. After the astonishment of the variety, they may be intrigued, disturbed, excited. They begin to move to task, to get ready to explore where there are opportunities and possibilities, to consider what they want to do about what they've heard and begun to understand.

LIM News: *How does culture impact storytelling? Are there some types of organizational cultures that are more enthusiastic, resistant, are there differences between Hispanics, Europeans, Asians, Americans?*

JT: I haven't seen much research on the impact of culture on storytelling in organizational settings. If people know of some, I'd be mighty interested. Of course we know that national, regional, and local cultures and ideologies impact organizations, so my going in assumption would be that it would likewise affect the stories that comprise the organization and that are produced by it. It would affect the dominant stories, the emergent stories, and the way that those stories get told. When I was working in China some years ago, I noticed that people don't tell stories about themselves. They don't feature themselves as a central protagonist. In America, people like to talk about themselves, and it is sometimes even difficult to have them talk about a group, or about social dependencies. But a production worker in China will talk immediately about his colleagues. The story that he chooses to tell of his work, is a cooperative story. It's a we-story, not an I-story. I just have anecdotes, things that I've noticed, nothing that is conclusive evidence. We could use more research here to understand what

differences exist.


LIM News: *If our readers would like to use storytelling, what would it be best for?*

JT: The most important thing, I think, is to learn to listen to the stories people have to share. Line managers, HRD professionals, CEOs, everyone needs to learn to listen more. Differently. Really listening, not judging, not to suggest a dissenting opinion or even to respond at all. That is where it starts. Figure out what environments you can structure so people can be honest. Then begin to notice gaps, opportunities that you had not seen - about how work happens, things that could be better easier, disturbing things that you've maybe ignored or hoped would go away, but that are there anyway. Things will begin to become clearer. When you see them, you have the opportunity to do some repair, make reparations if you will, make the organization healthier, more effective, in the interest of both the organization and the people who comprise it.

LIM News: *What are some risks/dangers, things to pay attention to when using storytelling?*

JT: The big risk is not about storytelling. The big risk is about silencing the stories. Getting them and burying them, or never getting them at all.

LIM News: *If our readers would like to try it out, what would you recommend/ what advice do you have?*

JT: Well, I'd say to start. Bravely listen. Bravely tell. Be honest. Have courage. Connect your heart with the stories. Be ready to be amazed. 

Jo A. Tyler Ed.D.

Jo Tyler is Assistant Professor at Penn State University. Her primary research focus is organizational storytelling, and with Dr. David Boje and others, she is a co-founder of the *Storytelling Organization Institute (STORI)*, focused on the exploration of organizational storytelling in research and practice. She can be reached at jat235@psu.edu.

For more information on **STORI**, the Storytelling Organization Institute, see <http://www.storyemergence.org/>

For more information on David Boje's concept of narrative's prison mentioned above, see <http://business.nmsu.edu/~dboje/690/papers/Story%20is%20Beyond%20Narrative%20Aug%2024%2005%20Boje.pdf>

For additional reading on how stories can provide insight into your organization, consider:

Boje, D. (2001). *Narrative methods for organizational and communication research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in social science research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, fictions and fantasies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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