

Meaning Making through Narrative: on not Losing the Plot

Terry Martin

Introduction

The most pertinent phrase for me in the Call for Papers for this Symposium was ‘**we become preoccupied with motivation when people cannot find meaning in their work**’. It was taken from Burkard Sievers (groundbreaking) paper, “Beyond the Surrogate of Motivation”

What struck me in this phrase and in Sievers’ argument in his paper was a challenge to some longstanding assumptions I have held about motivation and management, having taught courses for many years on these topics in the School of Education at the University of Southampton. I had already found myself increasingly uneasy in my lecturing role about some of what I was teaching, and Sievers’ comment seemed to hit the nail on the head. Also in my employee role I felt that any organisation which, to improve staff motivation, had introduced measures such as workshops on work-life balance (as if work isn’t part of life) and the MacDonald’s inspired Lecturer of the Year Awards, had already begun to seriously lose the plot.

In a nutshell what I wanted to do in a paper for this Symposium was to explore the process of meaning-making from within the ‘narrative’ mode and in particular to look at the difficulty or even impossibility, in certain kinds of organizational situations, of constructing a viable narrative. This experience is sometimes referred to as ‘losing the plot’; hence the sub-title of my paper. When this happens the ensuing feelings of despair and meaninglessness have, inevitably, deleterious effects on the motivation of those concerned and on the organisation as a whole.

In the ISPSO we share certain assumptions and beliefs but also have different understandings of psychoanalysis and practice derived from it. For me two key features of a psychoanalytic approach are:

1. a quest for meaning, and
2. a belief that things are not always what they seem, that appearances can be deceptive.

Meanings can be both manifest and also latent and in both cases there is a need for interpretation. With latent meanings however there is an even greater interpretive challenge, as meanings are more ambiguous and elusive. The process of interpretation has of course always been central to the practice of psychoanalysis.

Narrative

Narrative studies have undergone an explosion over the last two decades, covering a diverse range of disciplines within the human sciences; psychology, anthropology, history, theology, literary studies, organisation and management studies, etc. The essential heart of a narrative approach comes from the observation that as human beings we are essentially a meaning-making species, *Homo sapiens*. How and why this should be so is, as they say, another story. Some narratives attempting this formidable task of explanation are more plausible than others; although plausibility, like beauty, lies in the mind of the beholder. Plausibility is an important notion and although essentially subjective, members of a particular group or society are likely to share similar views about which narratives are plausible and which implausible. Narratives can be persuasive and arouse our gullibility, our desire and wish to believe certain things.

The psychological process of “sense-making” is a complex one involving both cognitive and affective components. In our everyday lives we usually manage to navigate our way relatively effortlessly through familiar situations that don’t arouse our conscious attention or make great demands upon our sense-making efforts. The familiar and taken-for-granted aspects of both the natural and the social worlds are normally both unremarkable and unremarked upon. They constitute what Parkes (1993 and 1996b) has called our **assumptive world**, a network of commonly held beliefs and assumptions about the way the world is expected to be and to behave and that provides a measure of security through the predictability of events. This assumptive world is both a social (Berger & Luckman, 1967 and Burr, 1995) and a psychological construction (Kelly, 1955 and 1963). It is crucial for our sanity and survival. We come to take for granted certain features and processes and they become an unquestioned backdrop for our purposeful actions within the world.

Only when we are surprised by the unexpected do we seek explanations. We don’t for example, in the normal course of things, ask why a table does not fall down. In fact it requires some sophisticated science to explain why things don’t collapse but mostly we tend to take it for granted and are only prompted into enquiry when they do unexpectedly fall down or behave in some uncharacteristic manner. Those exceptional individuals who are curious about the expected and taken for granted aspects of things, and seek meaning there, have the makings of scientists assuming they are not scientists already.

What is meant by meaning is discussed by Janoff-Bulman (1997):

Meaning can be defined in numerous ways, including purpose, intent, order, sense, interpretation, signification and denotation. There appear to be two primary understandings of meaning that help inform survivors' crises and coping post-trauma: *meaning as comprehensibility* and *meaning as significance*. The first involves questions regarding whether something 'makes sense'; in other words, whether it fits with a system of accepted rules or theories. The second involves questions regarding whether something is of value or worth. (My italics)

Meaning as comprehensibility and *meaning as significance* are not only relevant to us when facing crises but also in the normal run of everyday life. When we fail to make sense of our experience or as T. S. Eliot put it in the Four Quartets (The Dry Salvages)

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
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then it lies undigested within us, and if it stays that way can sink out of sight below the level of awareness. Unfortunately out of sight is not in this case out of mind, and unprocessed experience, particularly if it is of a traumatic or difficult nature can continue to exert influence in the present.

The existential phenomenologist Ernesto Spinelli commences his book *The Interpreted World* with the following statement:

As human beings, we attempt to make sense of all our experiences. Through our mental acts, we strive to impose meaning upon the world. (2005, p.1)

Theodore Sarbin, who until his recent death was a leading exponent of the use of narrative approaches within psychology and editor of another foundational text, *Narrative psychology: the storied nature of human conduct*, makes a similar claim:

I am treating the narrative as an organizing principle for human action. Organizing principles are invoked, then, to help account for the observation that *human beings impose structure on the flow of experience*. (1986, p.)

This imposition of structure and meaning implies that it is constructed in the mind rather than objectively already present in the world, and our minds therefore are actively interpreting our sensory experiences. Donald Polkinghorne, a social scientist whose *Narrative knowing and the human sciences* is another of the foundational texts of narrative studies, commences his work with the following:

Experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. Thus, the study of human behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience. This book is an inquiry into narrative, the *primary* form by which human experience is made meaningful. Narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organizes human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes. (My italics) (1988)

I will later be concerned with those times when experience ceases to be meaningful and the consequences that flow from this. Although Polkinghorne privileges narrative over other forms of meaning-making, Bruner (1986) puts it on equal terms alongside the ‘logico-scientific’ (or paradigmatic) form or mode.

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought.

Bruner’s modes may also be conceptualized as the ends of a continuum rather than mutually exclusive options. Our narratives can incorporate aspects of logico-scientific thinking, and conversely logico-scientific thinking can often be expressed in narrative form. Bruner also notes how narratives entail intentional mental states; how people act purposefully in particular settings. To talk about behaviour is reductionist and limiting; a significant point given the focus on both organisational behaviour and behaviour management in classrooms. There is a danger of simply ignoring the purposive element central to human action.

Polkinghorne (1988) goes on to say:

Because it is a cognitive process, a mental operation, narrative meaning is not an “object” available to direct observation. However, the individual stories and histories that emerge in the creation of human narratives are available for direct observation. Examples of narrative include personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels, and the everyday stories we use to explain our own and others’ actions.

By the direct observation of specific narratives he is referring to the important act of interpretation, which is the key process in this hermeneutical endeavour. Although hermeneutics may be described as the development and study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts, it is more broadly used in contemporary philosophy to denote the study of theories and methods of the interpretation of all texts and systems of meaning. In its modern form it originated in the 19th century in studies of sacred texts; it is therefore ironically to find an advertisement for a recent translation of the ‘World’s All Time Bestseller’ claiming that no interpretation is needed. This claim is a hermeneutic impossibility. It is not only texts but all human activity that is in need of interpretation and we therefore need to set the process of meaning-making in the wider context of culture.

Geertz (1973) emphasised that in our quest for meaning it is interpretation all the way down; he defines the elusive concept of culture in semiotic way:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

A focus on the interpretive process will be familiar and endorsed by those accepting a psychoanalytic approach, but the radical nature of Geertz's claim has not always been fully pursued. In the words of Erben (1998), 'suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun indicates the reciprocal, constitutive nature of object and subject'. Thinking about this reciprocity in the co-construction of narrative is a productive and alternative way of exploring the issues of dependency and inter-dependency and it also implies the importance of ethics in the construction and interpretation of narratives, a point explored in great detail by MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*.

I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find my self a part?' We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories ... that children learn or mis-learn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. *Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words*. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things. (My italics) (1981)

Many children today have been deprived of stories and much else and have been left indeed 'unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words'.

The concept of culture is used widely in the study of organisations but often in a rather superficial way. One honourable exception is Edgar Schein whose work in this field is exemplary, and in one important text explores the relationship between organisational consultancy and ethnography. Geertz criticizes the vague and meaningless definitions of the concept of culture; ethnography would generally benefit by returning to its anthropological roots and the semiotic definition of Geertz. Thus refreshed it might be less prone to indulge in endless methodological debates and concern itself instead with matters of substance.

Complex narratives cannot always be constructed in real time, in the immediacy of here-and-now experience but often require time for reflection, which is the essence of what Søren Kierkegaard meant when he wrote 'Life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backwards'. This process of reflection is essentially conversational and starts developmentally early in children as they acquire language. Indeed Bruner suggests that the quest for meaning

and need for communication drives the process of language acquisition. Very young children, two to three years of age, will talk to their teddy bears about the events of the day; a reflective process that is about creating meaning. As we grow up from early childhood important developmental changes occur; we stop talking to our teddy bears and instead start talking to ourselves silently inside our heads. This internal conversation, monologue or dialogue, comprises a significant part of our mental activity and is where and when most personal narratives (and Research Seminars) get created. Some of us become so adept at it that we cannot easily switch this inner voice off, particularly when we want to go to sleep. Sleep of course offers the opportunity to dream, which from a psychoanalytic perspective is an important sense-making process in need of interpretation. This inner dialogue is also the focus of attention in cognitive-behavioural therapy, when the inner monologue has got trapped in fruitless grooves.

In the context of organizational studies Czarniawska (1998) offers the following helpful comments.

Narrative enters organization studies in at least four forms: organizational research that is written in a storylike fashion (“tales from the field,” to paraphrase Van Maanen, 1988); organizational research that collects organizational stories (tales of the field); organizational research that conceptualizes organizational life as story making and organization theory as story reading (interpretative approaches); and a disciplinary reflection that takes the form of literary critique.

Although this paper focuses particularly upon the third form on her list, the other forms are proving equally productive in contemporary organizational studies.

Dave Snowden defines a **script** as the official story of an organisation, and an **anti-story** as ‘a cynical and spontaneous reaction to a script that is too far away from the reality of life within the organisation concerned’. The terms **Official Narrative** and **Counter Narrative** will be used here instead; it is not necessarily a bad thing to have these co-existing and Counter Narratives do not have to be cynical. Official Narratives are appropriately upbeat and positive to inspire confidence in the enterprise both within and without the organisation. Problems arise when, as Snowden observes, a gulf develops between the Official Narrative and the lived experience of employees. These feelings can manifest themselves in various ways including humorous posters on walls: “You don’t have to be mad to work here but it helps”, “The light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off”, and of course the ubiquitous Dilbert. Counter Narratives can also express themselves in various ways including those known colloquially as the **Conspiracy** and the **Cock-up** narratives. These challenge either the integrity or competence of leadership and management, or both; they both imply a breakdown

in trust and confidence, invaluable commodities in the commerce of organisational life. Faced with a reality we find increasingly difficult to make sense of we can also construct narratives which challenge either the sanity or probity of others; they are construed as mad or bad or both. We say of someone's behaviour of which we disapprove that it was mindless or senseless. However it is likely that the person concerned was very mindful of what they were doing.

There is an important distinction between constructing a narrative which is uncongenial or deeply unpleasant to make sense and meaning of a situation, and being unable to make any sense or construct any meaning. Also there can be a variety of factors at work impeding sense making; most of us have at one time or another sat in a lecture or class completely lost and baffled by the unfamiliarity and complexity of what is being presented. It has gone 'over our heads'. This is a persistent experience for many pupils who, unable to find meaning in the curriculum presented to them, find other meanings to pursue. Polkinghorne (1988) writes:

When a human event is said not to make sense, it is usually not because a person is unable to place it in the proper category. The difficulty stems, instead, from a person's inability to integrate the event into a plot whereby it becomes understandable in the context of what has happened.

The notions of contingency and non-contingency offer an interesting challenge to a narrative perspective. The contingent nature of human existence is that all aspects of our lives might have been otherwise. Of any event, no matter how insignificant, it might have turned out differently. Who has not from time to time wondered along the lines of what might have been. For example if I had not gone to that party and met so-and-so how differently my life would have turned out? What we don't always fully appreciate is that is true of all events not just those we construe as turning points. We often make sense of such happenings by saying 'it was meant to happen'; betraying a belief that contingency, despite appearances may not be the last word. There are events which had they happened would have meant that for a particular individual in their uniqueness, would never have been born. The deep mystery of the contingency of our very existence links to the deep desire, felt by some, to not be. Suicides amongst young people, particularly males are a contemporary phenomenon of great concern. Also most worryingly are suicides of teachers and head-teachers before or after OFSTED inspections.

It may well be the case that if one misses the bus into town and catch the next one it seems as though it makes no significant difference. However it certainly makes a difference one misses a plane that later crashes killing everyone who was on board. One is left wondering why they

were spared. The non-contingent aspects of life are the converse of this and present a moral challenge. Life is not fair and there is no contingent relation between a person's character and actions and what befalls them in life. The rain falls equally on the just and unjust even though we'd like to be kept dry whilst the unjust got a double dowsing. This is hardly a discovery of the 21st century for the psalmists of Old Testament times complained endlessly about how the wicked flourished and the righteous perished. Reconciling the non-contingency of the world to Providence has been the perennial task of theodicy.

Because, left to its own devices, the world does not deliver justice then it becomes a human task to do so and hence the importance in any civilized society or organization of a rule of law, and in the global context this is expressed in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When afflicted by adversity or tragic disaster our instinctive response is to cry out 'Why me?' and to find someone to blame. If there has been serious negligence or technical failure then of course it is important to find out and seek to make sure it doesn't happen again and to seek compensation. Often there is no such convenient explanation and the only answer, at the end of a long day, to the 'Why me?' question are the uncaring and brutal responses 'Why not you?' and 'How come you are so special that you should be immune from life's tragedies?' These are not the kind of responses you'd actually make in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy but we can never ultimately move on from such experiences until we abandon our quest for **reasons** and embrace a quest for **purpose**. This is neatly illustrated in an episode in John's Gospel:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. (John 9, v1-3)

Jesus deflects the disciples from seeking explanations to offering a purpose; not accepted by all as subsequent events demonstrated. Contingency and non-contingency account for the universal appeal of counter-factual narratives; what might have been. A good example is a recently published counter-factual novel **Resistance** by Owen Sheers; an account of what might have happened if the Normandy landings of D-Day had failed and the Nazis had invaded and occupied the UK. It is based on actual contingency (sic) plans that were in place should such a situation arise and is a particularly disturbing read. Strictly speaking you can't have a counter-factual narrative about the future, for there are not yet any facts to counter. However imaging various possibilities, scenarios, is important for young people as they make

key decisions about their futures and try out different identities for size, and express their pre-occupations about, for example, the planet's future. Science fiction is perhaps the genre most representative of future counter-factual narratives. Contingency is the price of human freedom and maybe could provide a fruitful focus through which to address a number of pupil preoccupations which this paper will return to later.

There is much current interest in science about whether the universe as whole is truly contingent. Was our existence foreordained from the beginning, or are we humans nothing more than a "farce," a fluke product of a "chain of accidents"? (Shermer) According to Stephen Jay Gould if the tape of life were played again humans would most likely never have evolved.

So powerful are the effects of contingency that a small change in the early stages of a sequence can produce large effects in the later stages. Edward Lorenz (1979) calls this the butterfly effect and by now the metaphor is well known: a butterfly flaps its wings in Brazil, producing a storm in Texas.

Freeman Dyson asks: 'Did the universe know we were coming?' implying that behind appearances there might be higher purposes. In contrast Steven Weinberg believes that 'the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless'. Given that many people now look to cosmologists for answers to ultimate questions about the 'Meaning of Life' these are fascinating and relevant issues. However even if we can discover much detail about the **processes** by which things came into being these say nothing about **purpose**, the **teleos**.

In an unpublished paper Gabriel has introduced the concept of **organizational miasma**. What characterizes that particular kind of organizational situation is the difficulty or even impossibility of constructing coherent narratives and hence the ensuing feelings of despair and meaninglessness. Gabriel himself said that 'Silence is the frequent response to miasma'. Susan Long (2008) has recently developed the concept of the **perverse organisation** and similarly Mark Stein (2007) the concept of **Toxicity**; again one can hypothesise that in such circumstances narrative construction is impeded with consequent deleterious effects on meaning making and motivation.

The final part of this paper will illustrate these ideas with a narrative, which is both general and specific, taken from the world of education, where issues of motivation and meaning are currently most pressing for teachers and students.

Narrative studies have undergone an explosion over the last two decades, covering a diverse range of disciplines within the human sciences; psychology, anthropology, history, theology, literary studies, organisation and management studies, etc. The essential heart of a narrative approach comes from the observation that as human beings we are essentially a meaning-making species, *Homo sapiens*. How and why this should be so is, as they say, another story. Some narratives attempting this formidable task of explanation are more plausible than others; although plausibility, like beauty, lies in the mind of the beholder. Plausibility is an important notion and although essentially subjective, members of a particular group or society are likely to share similar views about which narratives are plausible and which implausible. Narratives can be persuasive and arouse our gullibility, our desire and wish to believe certain things.

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What is meaning? This is a tricky question but I take my lead from psychologist Janoff-Bulman, whose research interests have included trauma, post-traumatic growth and the processes of value creation. As breakdowns in meaning and meaning-making are an intrinsic feature of the experience of trauma, her writing is most relevant to my theme:

Meaning can be defined in numerous ways, including purpose, intent, order, sense, interpretation, signification and denotation. There appear to be two primary understandings of meaning that help inform survivors’ crises and coping post-trauma: *meaning as comprehensibility* and *meaning as significance*. The first involves questions regarding whether something ‘makes sense’; in other words, whether it fits with a system of accepted rules or theories. The second involves questions regarding whether something is of value or worth. (My italics)

Meaning as comprehensibility and *meaning as significance* are not only relevant to us when facing crises but also in the normal run of everyday life. When we fail to make sense of our experience or as T. S. Eliot put it in the Four Quartets (The Dry Salvages) 'We had the experience but missed the meaning, And approach to the meaning restores the experience', then it lies undigested within us, and if it stays that way can sink out of sight below the level of awareness. Unfortunately out of sight is not in this case out of mind, and unprocessed experience, particularly if it is of a traumatic or difficult nature can continue to exert influence.

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or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought.

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reciprocity in the co-construction of narrative is a productive and alternative way of exploring the issues of dependency and inter-dependency and it also implies the importance of ethics in the construction and interpretation of narratives, a point explored in great detail by MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*.

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Although this paper focuses particularly upon the third form on her list, the other forms are proving equally productive in contemporary organizational studies.

Dave Snowden defines a **script** as the official story of an organisation, and an **anti-story** as ‘a cynical and spontaneous reaction to a script that is too far away from the reality of life within the organisation concerned’. The terms **Official Narrative** and **Counter Narrative** will be used here instead; it is not necessarily a bad thing to have these co-existing and **Counter Narratives** do not have to be cynical. **Official Narratives** are appropriately upbeat and positive to inspire confidence in the enterprise both within and without the organisation. Problems arise when, as Snowden observes, a gulf develops between the **Official Narrative** and the lived experience of employees. These feelings can manifest themselves in various ways including humorous posters on walls: “You don’t have to be mad to work here but it helps”, “The light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off”, and of course the ubiquitous Dilbert. **Counter Narratives** can also express themselves in various ways including those known colloquially as the **Conspiracy** and the **Cock-up** narratives. These challenge either the integrity or competence of leadership and management, or both; they both imply a breakdown in trust and confidence, invaluable commodities in the commerce of organisational life. Faced with a reality we find increasingly difficult to make sense of we can also construct narratives which challenge either the sanity or probity of others; they are construed as mad or bad or both. We say of someone’s behaviour of which we disapprove that it was mindless or senseless. However it is likely that the person concerned was very mindful of what they were doing.

There is an important distinction between constructing a narrative which is uncongenial or deeply unpleasant to make sense and meaning of a situation, and being unable to make any sense or construct any meaning. Also there can be a variety of factors at work impeding sense making; most of us have at one time or another sat in a lecture or class completely lost and baffled by the unfamiliarity and complexity of what is being presented. It has gone ‘over our heads’. This is a persistent experience for many pupils who, unable to find meaning in the curriculum presented to them, find other meanings to pursue. Polkinghorne (1988) writes:

When a human event is said not to make sense, it is usually not because a person is unable to place it in the proper category. The difficulty stems, instead, from a person’s inability to integrate the event into a plot whereby it becomes understandable in the context of what has happened.

The notions of contingency and non-contingency offer an interesting challenge to a narrative perspective. The contingent nature of human existence is that all aspects of our lives might have been otherwise. Of any event, no matter how insignificant, it might have turned out differently. Who has not from time to time wondered along the lines of what might have been. For example if I had not gone to that party and met so-and-so how differently my life would have turned out? What we don’t always fully appreciate is that is true of all events not just those we construe as turning points. We often make sense of such happenings by saying ‘it was meant to happen’; betraying a belief that contingency, despite appearances may not be the last word. There are events which had they happened would have meant that for a particular individual in their uniqueness, would never have been born. The deep mystery of the contingency of our very existence links to the deep desire, felt by some, to not be. Suicides amongst young people, particularly males are a contemporary phenomenon of great concern. Also most worryingly are suicides of teachers and head-teachers before or after OFSTED inspections.

It may well be the case that if one misses the bus into town and catch the next one it seems as though it makes no significant difference. However it certainly makes a difference one misses a plane that later crashes killing everyone who was on board. One is left wondering why they were spared. The non-contingent aspects of life are the converse of this and present a moral challenge. Life is not fair and there is no contingent relation between a person’s character and actions and what befalls them in life. The rain falls equally on the just and unjust even though we’d like to be kept dry whilst the unjust got a double dowsing. This is hardly a discovery of the 21st century for the psalmists of Old Testament times complained endlessly about how the

wicked flourished and the righteous perished. Reconciling the non-contingency of the world to Providence has been the perennial task of theodicy.

Because, left to its own devices, the world does not deliver justice then it becomes a human task to do so and hence the importance in any civilized society or organization of a rule of law, and in the global context this is expressed in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When afflicted by adversity or tragic disaster our instinctive response is to cry out ‘Why me?’ and to find someone to blame. If there has been serious negligence or technical failure then of course it is important to find out and seek to make sure it doesn’t happen again and to seek compensation. Often there is no such convenient explanation and the only answer, at the end of a long day, to the ‘Why me?’ question are the uncaring and brutal responses ‘Why not you?’ and ‘How come you are so special that you should be immune from life’s tragedies?’ These are not the kind of responses you’d actually make in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy but we can never ultimately move on from such experiences until we abandon our quest for reasons and embrace a quest for purpose. This is neatly illustrated in an episode in John’s Gospel:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. (John 9, v1-3)

Jesus deflects the disciples from seeking explanations to offering a purpose; not accepted by all as subsequent events demonstrated. Contingency and non-contingency account for the universal appeal of counter-factual narratives; what might have been. A good example is a recently published counter-factual novel *Resistance* by Owen Sheers; an account of what might have happened if the Normandy landings of D-Day had failed and the Nazis had invaded and occupied the UK. It is based on actual contingency (sic) plans that were in place should such a situation arise and is a particularly disturbing read. Strictly speaking you can’t have a counter-factual narrative about the future, for there are not yet any facts to counter. However imaging various possibilities, scenarios, is important for young people as they make key decisions about their futures and try out different identities for size, and express their pre-occupations about, for example, the planet’s future. Science fiction is perhaps the genre most representative of future counter-factual narratives. Contingency is the price of human freedom and maybe could provide a fruitful focus through which to address a number of pupil preoccupations which this paper will return to later.

There is much current interest in science about whether the universe as whole is truly contingent. Was our existence foreordained from the beginning, or are we humans nothing more than a "farce," a fluke product of a "chain of accidents"? (Shermer) According to Stephen Jay Gould if the tape of life were played again humans would most likely never have evolved.

So powerful are the effects of contingency that a small change in the early stages of a sequence can produce large effects in the later stages. Edward Lorenz (1979) calls this the butterfly effect and by now the metaphor is well known: a butterfly flaps its wings in Brazil, producing a storm in Texas.

Freeman Dyson asks: 'Did the universe know we were coming?' implying that behind appearances there might be higher purposes. In contrast Steven Weinberg believes that 'the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless'. Given that many people now look to cosmologists for answers to ultimate questions about the 'Meaning of Life' these are fascinating and relevant issues. However even if we can discover much detail about the **processes** by which things came into being these say nothing about **purpose**, the teleos.

In an unpublished paper Gabriel has introduced the concept of **organizational miasma**. What characterizes that particular kind of organizational situation is the difficulty or even impossibility of constructing coherent narratives and hence the ensuing feelings of despair and meaninglessness. Gabriel himself said that 'Silence is the frequent response to miasma'. Susan Long (2008) has recently developed the concept of the **perverse organisation** and similarly Mark Stein (2007) the concept of **Toxicity**; again one can hypothesise that in such circumstances narrative construction is impeded with consequent deleterious effects on meaning making and motivation.

The final part of this paper illustrates these ideas with a personal narrative, which is both general and specific, taken from the world of education, where issues of motivation and meaning are currently most pressing for teachers and students.

This final part will not be presented during the session

End

The natural starting point for this narrative is the Education Act 1944, which brought into being in the UK a new devolved system of secondary schooling, alongside other welfare reforms, designed to provide for the needs of the post-war generation. What is most impressive about the architects of these reforms, most prominently R. A. Butler, was their foresight and imagination displayed at a time when the outcome of the hostilities into which the nations of the world had been plunged, was far from certain. Despite, or maybe because of the hostilities at the time, they showed the same kind of vision and determination displayed in abundance by that most remarkable of leaders, Sir Winston Churchill. He never missed an opportunity to remind the British people of what was at stake in the conflict against Hitler, in terms of the traditions and values central to their way of life:

If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. (Speech to House of Commons June 18th 1940, Their Finest Hour)

Unfortunately the immediate post-war period was not entirely broad, sunlit uplands and the British Empire, like the Third Reich, may not have lasted a thousand years, but few will dispute that those were some of the UK's finest hours.

As one of the beneficiaries of this educational reform the author entered a grammar school in the late 1950s in Islington, then a rundown working-class area of London. The gentrification by incoming yuppies and nouveau riche was still decades away. The school had been founded in 1613 and a 350th anniversary was celebrated towards the end of my time there, and the unusual circumstances in which the school had been founded were something of which pupils were regularly reminded. Few schools owe their origin to a cow, a village maiden and an archer's arrow. The cow was being milked in a field outside the village of Islington in the mid 16th century when a young maid, Alice Wilkes, accompanied by her servant stopped to watch and try her hand in milking the cow. An arrow from nearby butts sailed across the field and pierced the crown of her hat, just as she was sitting down, and miraculously did not injure her. Much impressed by her providential escape, she vowed that when rich enough she would do something for posterity to mark her gratitude to God.

Some 50 years later, now known as Alice Owen, widowed three times by a brewer, a mercer and latterly by Judge Thomas Owen, she was a lady of considerable wealth. Reminded of her vow by the same servant, she established in 1613 a school for thirty boy scholars from

Islington and almshouses for poor widows. She entrusted the administration of the school and its endowment to the Worshipful Company of Brewers which, for nearly four centuries as Trustees of the Dame Alice Owen Foundation, has supported and encouraged the school.

In the time the author was there the school had no logo or mission statement; it did however have the same crest and motto as the Worshipful Company of Brewers. Certain traditions and customs were in place then and continue even to this day. Dame Alice herself instructed the Governors to visit the school annually to inspect the scholars' progress. This visit now forms part of the School's Open Day and prize giving ceremony. The original scholars collected flowers from the surrounding fields to make buttonholes for themselves and to decorate the school; the custom now is for carnations to be worn by all pupils and to be presented to the Governors at Visitation.

It was long-established for the Governors to present the boy who welcomed them at Visitation with a small sum of money. From this derives the custom of presenting pupils with 'beer money'. Each year pupils would queue to receive a sum of money which rose with seniority; much of this money was probably subsequently recycled into the same brewing industry which had donated it.

The reason the author went to this particular grammar school was quite simple; my father had been a pupil there nearly thirty years previously, and there were still some members of staff around when I went there who had taught him. He came from a poor, single-parent family, and stayed there until only fourteen years old, the then normal leaving age. Like many of his generation he completed his further and higher education at government expense in the armed services. His 'graduation ceremony', at age 22, was on the beaches of Dunkirk, queuing patiently in the sea to climb aboard a ship, which was subsequently bombed on its way home. Fortunately there were no health and safety officials overseeing the evacuation; this task was done magnificently by the Royal Navy. On eventual return to London he found his home in ruins, courtesy of the Luftwaffe, and set about finding his mother, who unbeknown to him had survived the bombing and had been re-housed

In his speech to House of Commons shortly after the conclusion of the evacuation, Winston Churchill said quite bluntly 'that what has happened in France and Belgium is a colossal military disaster'. He went to say:

We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. (Speech to House of Commons June 4th 1940, We Shall Fight on the Beaches)

This cautionary narrative was soon overtaken by a more upbeat one which has survived to this day, so that to speak of the 'Dunkirk spirit' is to describe the tendency of the British to pull together and overcome times of adversity, not to a propensity to produce such adversities in the first place. There are only about thirty minutes of archive film footage of the Dunkirk evacuation extant. The soldiers were so angry at what had happened to them that they threw the equipment of the camera-men overboard during the sea journey home.

The author's father hardly ever mentioned these experiences, an example of a 'silent narrative', explored most movingly in a trilogy of autobiographical novels by Melvyn Bragg. This inability or unwillingness to share difficult experiences brings with it a high price, paid not only by the individual, but also by those close to them.

The teaching staff of the school included many who had themselves been battered and bereaved by two world wars, so it is not surprising that their priority was neither to boost pupils' self esteem nor to provide much in the way of pastoral care. Several of them were quite eccentric and one or two probably certifiable; however none of them suffered from stress. Few of them would have understood the meaning of the term pedagogy even if they could have all spelt it.

However the pupils laboured away and most of them got a spread of GCE results at O level by age 16; that is a range of grades which accurately reflected their differing aptitudes in the various subjects. Of course pupils hoped to get good grades in those subjects which they thought to be their best, but it would have been literally unthinkable for anyone to have got or to have aspired to receive A grades in every subject; to have done so would have rendered the whole exercise literally meaningless, with a subsequent deleterious impact on motivation. Many children's experience of GCSEs today is in strong contrast, achieving top grades across the board and fulfilling their expectations; in fact they often feel failures if they had not done so.

None of the pupils, with one exception, was obese, and thanks to school dinners, the nutritional, if not gastronomic standards of which were laid down by law, and also to our regular exercise, pupils were all pretty healthy. But then the 1944 Act had given local education authorities the duty to contribute towards 'the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community'.

Citizenship was not on the curriculum in those days, and if you had gently suggested to the staff that it should be they would have been genuinely baffled. If the wider purpose of the

education to which pupils were daily subjected was to inculcate those civilised values which underpin the democratic way of life and to encourage participation in it, what point could there be to an extra subject like Citizenship, or lessons on British-ness for that matter?

The Headmaster, despite never having attended a management or leadership course, quietly got on, pretty much unaided, with running the school. He even found time to teach some lessons. Virtually everyone else, with the exception of the caretaker, secretary and dinner-ladies, taught full-time.

If one or more of today's OFSTED inspectors could be transported fifty years back in time to visit the school I'm sure they would be horrified by what they would observe and their sense of cultural dislocation no less than if they had been deposited accidentally, or more likely deliberately, in a long lost tribe in some remote region of the Amazonian rain forest. The staff would have been equally mystified by them and their questions. Learning Outcomes? School Development Plan? Value Added Scores? What a strange tongue these visitors do speak.

This is not intended to be painting an idealised and romantic picture of the past. McIntyre points out that there is a significant difference between rebelling within a tradition and opting out of a tradition. The former is one means by which the tradition renews itself as the narrative continues; the latter can lead to its demise. For all its inadequacies, of which there were many, school life was nevertheless meaningful to most of the pupils who were thereby motivated. The teachers certainly didn't set out to entertain and cynicism, the sine qua non of adolescence, abounded.

The system within which the school operated and flourished was itself divisive. However the 1944 Act required LEAs to provide state-funded education for pupils, up to the age of 15 that incorporated, to quote, 'instruction and training as may be desirable in view of their different ages, abilities and aptitudes'. The first step was to provide sufficient schools. The Act did not define the types of secondary school to be provided; but firm guidance by the Ministry of Education stipulated a tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. However, in practice the system that developed was largely bipartite, since few technical schools were established.

Those inept at practical matters were quarantined in a safe environment where they could do little harm, spending most of their time reading and regurgitating books under the stern tutelage of teachers most of whom were equally inept at practical matters.

Once a year, usually at Christmas time, pupils would walk crocodile fashion to the nearby St

Mary's Church, recently repaired from war time bombing, as a respite to the daily assembly required for compliance with the 1944 Act. Alternate arrangements were made for the not inconsiderable number of Jewish pupils in the school. A young recently ordained curate at the Church was George Carey, who went on to eventually become Archbishop of Canterbury.

It is a truism that traditions that take generations to create and mature can be destroyed in an instant. It is deeply ironic that it was a Conservative government that initiated the dismantling of the system created by the 1944 Act, culminating in the 1988 Act whose twentieth anniversary occurs this year. There has not been much dancing in the streets in celebration of this auspicious event, but then in marked contrast to their predecessors, the architects of the 1988 Act displayed a conspicuous poverty of imagination coupled with an obsessive desire to interfere in and micromanage every last detail of school life. Many of the educational reforms since 1988 have seen the introduction of a series of measures seeking to undo the unintended deleterious consequences of previous measures.

Another example of these changes can be seen by comparing contemporary official educational publication with those prior to the 1988 Act. They are glossy and attractive but with little substance; photos of beaming individuals sit alongside bullet pointed comments, but there is no obvious relationship between them. By contrast a 1986 curriculum document from HMI is, to be sure not exactly sexy in its presentation, but it does contain an argument about a complex issue. In one case an interesting and fruitful conceptualisation of the curriculum in terms of areas of learning and experience.

The areas of learning and experience listed and described below embody a point of view about the broad lines of development which should feature in a rounded education. No claim is made that this is the only possible, or an original, point of view. It provides only one perspective: another, which complements it, concerns knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes and is considered in paragraphs 90 to 105.

This and similar publications provided much food for thought and discussion with MA students in the late eighties. It possibly represents one of the last rearguard actions by HMI against the impending blitzkrieg of the educational reformers. Sadly their efforts were in vain. It was depressing back then to witness first-hand how little opposition or resistance there was to the educational reforms shown by University Departments of Education. After an initial flurry of activity they all rolled over and soon started actively collaborating, thereby losing moral authority.

Reforms in teacher education now mean that there are few if any opportunities in PGCE courses where students are exposed to the philosophy, psychology, sociology or history of

education. It is difficult to see what justification there can now be for training teachers in a university, anymore than the training of butchers or hairdressers. Both of these are proper jobs but the training for neither is appropriately located in the Academy. The emphasis in teacher training is now almost exclusively on ‘delivering the curriculum’, a metaphor based, as pointed out by Robin Alexander, upon the postal service. It is not surprising that the teaching profession suffers such high attrition rates for who can find long term meaning and purpose in an activity like delivering? Another, aggressive metaphorical description of what was once a sacred calling is ‘driving up standards’. Putting to one side the quibble that presumably it is performance that needs driving up, for how long can someone be motivated to continually improve standards and find meaning and satisfaction in such an activity?

There have been eleven ministers for state since 1988 and the name of the office has changed five times, Secretary of State for Education and Science, Education, Education and Employment, Education and Skills, and most recently Children, Schools and Families.

Church Schools

It is highly significant that conspicuous amongst those institutions bucking the trends of demoralisation and de-motivation are the Church Schools, predominantly Catholic and Anglican; both organised on a parish structure and thereby well positioned to develop community links and inclusive practices. Their shared religious faith is rich in narrative tradition; it is not every day after all that virgins give birth and dead men rise. If such non-canonical events trigger a narrative response, then it is one that has provided an interpretive challenge for two millennia. The term ‘Church School’ is used quite deliberately because the term ‘Faith School’ has different detonations and has acquired in recent times very negative associations. Church Schools are increasingly confident about asserting their beliefs and values but are often accused of indoctrination. Interestingly in the USA it is public schools that are accused of indoctrinating secular values and one of the fault lines in the controversy concerns the teaching of evolution; alternative and competing narratives about the ultimate contingency of life and the universe co-exist. Church Schools are increasingly popular with parents, including those who don’t share their underpinning convictions, and also with some who resort to devious means to get their children admitted.

The Churches have long had a stake in Education and it was the 1944 Act which redefined their role by striking a deal between them and the State. They effectively handed over their schools to the State, whilst retaining influence in specific areas of governance and curriculum. These influences are evident in the Voluntary Aided status many enjoy, which affects the

composition of governing bodies and admission procedures, the requirement by law of a daily act of worship in school, (the bane of many a headteacher's life in non-Church schools), and the specific inclusion of spiritual development in the aims of education.

Much interesting discussion has ensued about the term spiritual development; what it comprises of and how to measure it. An aspect, shared by religious and secular, is the human search for meaning, both ultimate and proximate. Where Church schools often have the edge is providing a context (that Peter Berger the sociologist of religion referred to as the sacred canopy), within which, and a resource (the narrative tradition), with which this search can be undertaken.

They can fairly be characterised as Good Schools, although the term good needs to be rescued from the corrupting influence of OFSTED-speak, that Orwellian version of newspeak that has debased the language of Education for two decades. In OFSTED-speak the term good, in reference to a school, teacher, lesson or head, has essentially the meaning of being technically efficient and effective. Good (in the Aristotelian sense) means an embodiment of those virtues which it has been the traditional role of schools to both emulate and inculcate. There is of course much contemporary concern with values, but again the notion is curiously debased, as if a set of values can be assembled like a shopping list, and then bolted on ad hoc to an existing system.

It is not only schools that have changed enormously in recent decades but all sectors of the education system have been afflicted in ways that have created problems for meaning-making. We only have to turn to university websites to illustrate this from the perspective of Higher Education. The narrative is typically quite appropriately upbeat and celebratory; to aspire to be the best is a laudable aim but not does not constitute a long term viable purpose and is thereby deficient in meaning. On closer inspection this narrative begins to unravel. Given the eminent position the University enjoys one wonders why it has taken responsibility, on behalf of the Training and Development Agency for Schools, for managing a Skills Test Centre for IT students. I used to walk pass the Centre everyday on my way to my office, and as far as I could see its main function seemed to be to ritually humiliate students for no discernible useful purpose.

Children

Children represent and embody our hope for the future; yet we have a curiously ambivalent attitude to children in this country. On the one hand only about three quarters of those eligible

to be born and thus join the human race do so, one quarter being aborted, and on the other hand we surround those fortunate enough to be born with protection measures out of all proportion to the actual risks to which they are exposed; it seems as if these measures must be driven more by guilt than love. MacIntyre (1967) includes abortion in his list of contemporary moral debates he characterises as interminable, the protagonists proceeding from quite different presuppositions. It is pertinent to note that, from a narrative perspective those from the pro-life position give preference to the creation of a shared narrative, welcoming new contributors on board, whilst those from the pro-choice position are essentially individualistic in their orientation.

Scarcely have the newly born learned to walk and talk than they clamber aboard an educational conveyor belt that is unremittingly punitive in terms of testing and prescription. The underlying dynamic in this case is fear and anger rather than love, as is evidenced by the endless public declamations about the main purpose of education being inextricably linked to economic survival in an increasingly competitive global environment. The subtext of this adult narrative message to future producers and consumers is, knuckle down and work hard, because if you don't how will we, adults, survive in our old age? An old age that, given current demographics, will last longer in retirement than in work. Of course the contemporary official narrative is in terms of *Every Child Matters*; in the USA the equivalent is called *No Child Left Behind*. The most recent UK version is **The Children's Plan** whose report looks like the work of Bob the Builder. The consultation must have been undertaken by him so mind-numbing are the conclusions. The desire for all children to achieve their full potential has achieved the status of a self-evident truth that it seems churlish to criticise such well meaning sentiments. As statements of intent admirable, but ungrounded in a deeper narrative and philosophic context they are vulnerable to trivialisation. They are not embedded or contextualised and exist in a virtual reality where the supply of prizes and promotions is unlimited. As I seek to realise my potential it might be that I get in the way of you realising yours.

None of this can be made sense of without considering the wider social context. For example, in a recent BBCRadio 4 broadcast, *A Point of View*, Clive James commented on the Swiftian absurdity of how the Post Office (formerly an institution now a business) plans to close somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 post offices. He wondered if the redundant buildings might be turned into community cohesion centres; if the newly appointed community cohesion co-ordinators have any time on their hands they could start selling stamps. This lack

of what used to be called joined-up thinking creates a social environment where creating a communal narrative becomes deeply problematic and short term palliatives are required to fix the increasingly intractable social problems.

Children have their own hopes and fears for the future. They recently made the front cover of Time Magazine (European Edition) under the headline: *Unhappy, Unloved and Out of Control*. The narrative is familiar enough, but in concluding her article Catherine Mayer writes:

Yet if Britain really is to become a better place for its children, it will have to acknowledge the roots of its crisis. That means focusing on helping kids more than on punishing them. A start might be listening to children themselves.

Recently, research is emerging from the UK which suggests that some schools are taking seriously the imperative of listening to children's' anxieties and hopes (Cantell, 2007).” Several thousand postcards were sent out to local schools, to be issued to pupils and giving them the opportunity to express in just a few words what their wishes (hopes) and worries (anxieties) were. From the 833 responses received an attractive booklet was produced in which these thoughts and feelings speak for themselves. Although any worry is for the person concerned a big worry, I want to concentrate on those worries which concern ‘big issues’, dominant amongst these in the responses are anxieties about the survival of the planet, war and death. Even very young children worry about these things as is evidenced in the data. How are we, as teachers and educators, helping young people to process such anxieties when they are hoping to be heard and to be taken seriously. They do not want simplistic answers for they are not easily fooled. It would be fascinating to get these children to elaborate their postcard responses into a narrative and see what further preoccupations emerge.

This brings us back full circle to Siever's paper in which he writes:

Any attempt towards discovering existential dimensions of meaning can be accomplished only if social scientists, managers and workers, (and I add teachers and educators) alike, both individually as well as collectively, again become aware of death as a fact of life; it is only through acknowledging mortality that humanization can occur.

In a Thought for the Day on BBC (18 April 2008), on the eve of Passover, the Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks spoke about how Judaism is a child centred faith. He went on to say:

I think children have suffered badly in the modern world. ... And there's another kind of child poverty: emotional, psychological. More than children need money, they need their parents' time. More than computer screens and video games they need our attention. More than mobile phones and credit cards, they need values to live by and a story that links them to the past and future, giving shape and direction to their lives.

My response is a simple Amen.

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Organizational Storytelling

This website at www.organizational-storytelling.org.uk/index.html describes the formal meetings and activities of an informal group of academics and practitioners who share an interest in organizational storytelling.