On Changing Organizational Cultures by Injecting New Ideologies: The Power of Stories

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ABSTRACT. Recent corporate legal and ethical melt-downs suggest that avoiding such harms to companies and to society requires a significant culture change within the organization. This paper addresses the issue of what it takes to change a corporate culture. While conventional wisdom may suggest that a change requires only the institution of an ethics office with proper reporting paths and an ethics code, such an approach is only a beginning. Many large corporations, especially those in danger of legal and ethical catastrophes, need to undertake multiple initiatives to generate a new culture that manifests new values and new vocabularies. A cultural change accomplished by changing large numbers of personnel is expensive in financial and human terms. One component of a less costly approach is to tell new and different stories within the corporation because stories establish the cultural DNA that gives organizations, families, and individuals their identities. Such changes in individual firms, however, are influenced by the ideological assumptions within which and under which the industry and the society operates.

KEY WORDS: corporate culture changes, stories as DNA, values, ideologies, new vocabularies, new narratives, mythic stories

> The most powerful people in a society are the myth makers.

Allan Bloom[1]

> Cultural myths are no more 'truth' than an architect's sketches are buildings. Their function is to explain events and guide decisions. Thus, while it is pointless to challenge myths as unrealistic, it is entirely valid to say that a culture's mythology serves it well only to the extent it retains its connection to the reality the culture faces. Myths must evolve as the context evolves.

Robert B. Reich[2]

> Myth is the software, the cultural DNA, the unconscious information, the metaprogram that governs the way we see 'reality' and the way we behave.

Sam Keen and Ann Valley-Fox[3]

How can a motivated organization achieve necessary cultural changes?

In training material designed to transmit its culture and values, the Motorola Corporation defines ''culture'' as ''a learned, shared and intergenerationally transmitted set of more or less stable, consistent and patterned values and standards…which usually affect actual behavior'' (Moorthy et al., 1998, p. 17). While Motorola's corporate culture applies primarily to workplace activities rather than to the whole of an employee's life, and begins with employment and ends with separation from the company, the company's clear intent is for employees to be conscious of its importance in making workplace decisions (Moorthy et al., 1998, p. 19).

One of the most powerful forces in an organization is its culture; yet, in many organizations it is invisible, intangible, and almost has a life of its own. Culture is like the air we breathe. ''We don't know who discovered water, but we're certain it wasn't a fish.''[4] Similar observations hold true for cultures. People do not usually ''see'' cultures; rather we tend to ''see through'' cultures much the same way fish see through water or people see through the lenses of glasses. Consequently, changing a ''corporate'' culture, whether it is the culture of a nation state, corporation, civic organization or university, is achieved neither easily nor quickly. Many new

college administrators have learned the power of culture to their chagrin.[5]

For answers to the question of how to change corporate culture non–violently, we need to look at multiple factors. Lack of investor trust and rigorous and even onerous regulation may not bring about a true conversion of the culture. The recent devastation of market values in some once high-flying companies brought about, in part, by loss of investor confidence will probably generate new management teams in some corporations; that change, without more, may or may not bring culture change. Similarly, federal and state regulation by itself, even draconian regulation changes may not prevail against entrenched cultures. The current ''sub-prime mortgage crisis'' may or may not bring new and substantial regulation as well as possible economic recession. Some research supports the conclusion that social norms (mores and folkways) can be more effective in altering people's behavior than attempting to enforce regulation (Ding, 2005; Macaskill, 2008), and regulation that works creatively within social norms and constructs is more effective than regulation that does not (Lessig, 1995, pp. 971–972).

One mid-level manager at a university said to us recently, ''If you want to change the culture around here [her university], you have to change the people.'' We asked if there was any other way to do it, and she said she did not know of any. When we have seen genuine corporate culture changes, they have been accomplished just that way: change the people. In cultural changing, organizational employees generally fall into three groups: (a) those who have signed on for the task; (b) the resistance forces; and (c) those that fall on the fence, who hesitate while they wait to see which side will prevail. For a genuine cultural revolution, as opposed to just putting up window dressing or a new veneer, the A group needs to dominate and those in the C camp need to sign up; and the B group needs to leave or be transferred to the Aleutians. It has been that easy as well as that ugly.

This paper addresses one possible alternative to that kind of change, changing culture by changing personnel. In the classic American movie ''The Godfather,'' Al Lettieri (playing Virgil ''The Turk'' Sollozzo) says to Robert Duvall (playing Tom Hagen, Don Corleone's *Consigliorì*), ''I don't like violence, Tom. I'm a businessman. Blood is a big expense'' (Paramount, 1972).[6] In corporations and universities,

''blood'' is also a big expense. There are lawsuits, severance pay, recruiting costs, training costs, transition expenses, and the loss of good will. ''Blood'' is a big cost; and consequently, we ask, ''Are there any alternatives to massive or rolling layoffs?'' If so, we should, a moral judgment as well as a pragmatic one, find them and use them. We suggest that the power of new corporate stories may be used to help change or heal toxic or ''increase-profits-at-any-cost'' types of corporate cultures.

Any genuine change in organizational culture probably needs at least two parts: (a) organizational changes such as a strong, well-funded ethics office endorsed and actively supported by the very top management levels with resources, power, and status; and (b) new vocabularies empowered by new stories conveying new values. It might even be possible, over time, to pay for such a program with cost savings from improved retention and morale not to mention litigation cost savings from not having to defend illegal and unethical actions.

Organizational changes are one part of the solution

Ethics officers need to have the same level of sophistication in ethics and organizational dynamics (Wines, 2007) as lawyers have in corporate and securities law. One expert has suggested that ethics officers need to be hired and fired by and report to the board, not to the CEO (Hill et al., 2006). One ethics officer told us that, before confronting the line officers on an ethics issue, she called her spouse to ask if it was ''okay'' if she got fired that day. Fortunately for that company, he has always said, ''Yes.''

Conoco was a company that seemed to have accomplished this task in the last 10 years before its November 2002 merger with Philips. The company made strategic decisions based on ethics, from building double hull tankers before it was legally required to resisting bribery and corruption in its worldwide operations as part of its ''ethics is good business because it will make us a preferred partner'' strategy. The company also instituted a President's award for Business Ethics which highlighted the ethical creativity of employees, had regular e-mails from auditing about ethics problems and how they were dealt with, and fired employees for

breaking the law and company ethics standards (Hill et al., 2006). The fact that the President – CEO – Chairman, Archie Dunham, and the Chief Auditor, Steve Scheck, were directly involved in these activities insured that they became part of the company culture.

Corporate cultures should embrace a new language empowered by new stories advancing positive values

Companies need to insure that the vocabulary of ethics becomes part of the culture in the organization. This is one of the most difficult parts of what we propose. Employees should learn how to talk ethics in much the same way they have learned to talk the other languages of business – management, marketing, accounting, finance, law, and safety. This can be accomplished by training but more importantly by including ethics as an important factor in strategic business decisions and in the reward and advancement decisions regarding employees.

Such changes will not come about in individual firms without a change in the ideological assumptions within which and under which the industry operates. Free market capitalism needs restraining forces if it is to operate ethically (Solomon and Hanson, 1983, pp. 263–279). We also know, from as far back as Adam Smith, that while market capitalism's strength is generating wealth its primary weakness is in distributing that wealth – not equally but with some criterion of fairness other than the possession of power to control. To satisfy fairness, this ideology suggests, the invisible hand of the market must be joined by the hand of regulation (Reich, 2007). The current struggles within the World Trade Organization show the conflict of these two ideologies, exacerbated by the self-interest of the countries involved.

The assumption that wealth is an individual's primary motivation needs to be tempered with the view that individuals also work to achieve a good life that includes other values besides wealth, including the satisfaction of good social relationships, social status, and a reputation for integrity. We can turn to history, philosophy, and religion to demonstrate that personal wealth does not directly or inevitably lead to personal happiness (Wines, 2006, pp. 366–367), but recent economic research supports this thesis as

well (Easterbrook, 2003, pp. 163–187; Frank, 1999, pp. 65–93). A good life involves doing good work not just gaining wealth (Gardner et al., 2002), and getting into the flow of good work is important to making an individual happy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, 1998).

The assumption that the aim of the firm is profit needs to be balanced by the realization that successful firms are those that aim to create a quality product or service that meets the needs of the market place. Profits will usually follow. Emphasis on profits leads to strategies that shift the focus from the quality of product or service and the loss of business in the long run. This point may be more difficult to make in the financial services where profits for the customer is the aim of the service but it can be made.

The benefits of free markets must be balanced by the benefits of regulated markets. We all know many examples of onerous and counterproductive regulations that drive up costs, stifle creativity, and bring about unexpected consequences. The Clinton era limit on the deductibility of CEO pay in excess of one million dollars which fueled the granting of options is one such example (Farrell, 2006, pp. 23–37). What we need to recognize is that regulations are needed to level the playing field, protect the good of the commons from having to absorb all the costs that companies do not want to add to their products, and to prevent the bad actors from driving out the good actors in the short run. While there are plenty of examples of bad regulations, there are plenty of examples of good ones as well. We can hope that Sarbanes-Oxley and proposed regulations for the Mutual Fund industry will prove as beneficial as federal regulation of food and drugs, for example, has been for the society. How are mutual fund customers to make informed choices in a free market in which few funds make their management costs, financial arrangements with companies they invest in, and compensation of their officers available to the public? Without such regulation, the mutual fund market is not really free.

And finally, the neoclassical view that the stockholders' interests are primary should be balanced by recognition that the firm is a complex social organization with obligations to many other stakeholder groups as well (Sturdivant, 1983). Customers, employees, bondholders, communities, and the managers themselves all contribute to the value of

the company and deserve consideration when the company's profits are being distributed. Managers are the decision makers for this distribution, guided by a board of directors whose fiduciary duties extend to multiple stakeholders as well. We can hope that recent governance requirements and the realization that aligning managers' interests with those of the other stakeholders through stock options has not had its intended consequences will set managers and directors in search of better ways to organize for-profit corporations.

The power of stories

Human beings are two-legged featherless story-telling creatures

The essential nature of humanity has been a central study of traditional liberal education for over a millennium (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, p. ix). Questions about the nature and destiny of mankind are not meant to be resolved so much as to provoke research and thought. It is probably a cliché that human beings formed into family units, then into clans, then into tribes, and finally into nation states. What caused this process and how it has been accomplished is central to many fields of study: sociology, anthropology, and social psychology, among others.

Economists of the neo-classical persuasion tell us that the central trait, the defining characteristic of human beings, is that they are rational utility maximizers. The starting point for this statement seems to come from Adam Smith who wrote that there is a "certain propensity in human nature…to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (Smith, 1937, p. 13). The central element of *homo sapiens* has "morphed into" rational utility maximizers. It fits the dominant mathematical/scientific/empirical models (Mulligan, 1987). However, it may not be the best way to define humanity or its central characteristics; and, moreover, there is evidence that altruistic behaviors, which are widely noted, are not explained by rational utility maximization (Rachels, 2002, pp. 63–75).

Others have offered their insights into the nature of humanity. One popular writer has suggested that there are six characteristics that separate human beings from the so-called lower animals: "Humor, Imagination, Eroticism – as opposed to the mindless, instinctive mating of glowworms or raccoons – Spirituality, Rebelliousness, and Aesthetics, an open appreciation of beauty for its own sake" (Robbins, 2000, pp. 100–101). Another intellectual has posited that humankind is the "mistake-prone" species (Postman, 1996, pp. 114–128).

Many possible explanations of human nature have been advanced, but the one we think that best provides a direction for moving cultures and establishing countervailing ideologies is the one that says stories are what hold groups of people together and give each group an identity: shared stories. Stories are the cultural DNA that transmit values to the new members of the Clan. Consequently, this section of the paper will advance the argument that we need to get our society to tell different stories if we want to change the culture and its political, social, and economic ideologies.

The power of the myth makers

The most powerful people in a society, according to Allen Bloom, are the myth makers (Bloom, 1987, pp. 199–201). That line stunned us when reading *The Closing of the American Mind* because it is so difficult to believe. We have over the past decade come to believe that it is a profound truth. Robert Coles, the Harvard psychiatrist, underlines this point when he demonstrates how effective literature and stories are as vehicles for encouraging ethical sensitivity and moral development (Coles, 1989).

What is a "myth"? Sam Keen writes that "myth refers to an 'intricate set of interlocking stories, rituals, rites, and customs that inform and give the pivotal sense of meaning and direction to a person, family, community or culture'" (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, pp. xi–xii). Keen asserts that a "living myth, like an iceberg," is 90% below the surface of the consciousness. Moreover, Keen asserts "[t]he dominant cultural myth that informs a person or a culture is like the 'information' contained in DNA or the program in the systems disk of a computer. Myth is the software, the cultural DNA, the unconscious information, the metaprogram that governs the way we see 'reality' and the way we behave" (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, p. xii).

Americans seem to be embracing Carl Jung's notions of cultural archetypes and his sense of ancestral memory. The amazing popularity of Joseph Campbell in the late 1980s (Campbell, 1990) suggests that many people are searching for an understanding of Jung's central question: "What myth are we living?" (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, p. x). Myth provides the underpinnings of the unquestioned assumptions and the reflexive responses. Differing cultural myths "make cows sacred objects for Hindus and hamburgers meals for Methodists, or turn dogs into pets for Americans and roasted delicacies for the Chinese" (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, p. xii). Indeed, it is the myth of "The American Melting Pot" that allows us to talk about roast dog as a Chinese or Vietnamese delicacy and ignore completely that roast dog was a special dish reserved for honored guests by the Cheyenne on the American plains (Connell, 1984, p. 133).

Dominant myths provide world views and roadmaps

The dominant myths in the U.S.A. include economic myths that attempt to sanctify the social order that, in turn, reflects the distribution of wealth, power, and status by the markets. Keen argues that "[b]y providing a world picture and a set of stories that explain why things are as they are, it creates consensus, sanctifies the social order, and gives the individual an authorized map of the path of life." But the cost or danger, if you will, of these unifying myths is that they create "selective blindness, narrowness, and rigidity." Such myths are "intrinsically conservative." Again to quote Keen, "[i]t encourages us to follow the faith of our fathers, to hold to time-honored truths, to imitate the way of heroes, to repeat the formulas and rituals in exactly the same way as they were done in the good old days" (Keen and Valley-Fox, 1989, pp. xi–xiii).

In 2001, noted social commentator Barbara Ehrenreich published her experiences trying "to make it" as a minimum-wage worker; she had worked as a waitress, a cleaning lady, a hotel maid, a nursing home aide, and a Wal-Mart sales clerk. She learned that one job was not enough; she needed to work at least two if she intended to live indoors, eat three squares, and not sleep in her car (Ehrenreich, 2001). Her book was essentially field work in sociology and economics. It was bitterly attacked in the summer of 2003 when it was made required summer reading for freshmen at University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (Ehrenreich, 2003). Some denounced it as "a classic Marxist rant" and "intellectual pornography." The problem, actually, was that her book publicized unwelcome facts that challenged parts of the revered myth of the American Dream. The result was that she was personally attacked because her message challenged a sacred myth but her message, itself, was factual.

In the world envisioned by subscribers to this extreme version of the American Dream myth, there are no sick days, no non-traditional family groups, no mentally ill or totally disabled people; just folks who are too lazy to earn their way in the bounty that is America. An early version of this myth was contained in a very popular lecture in the late nineteenth century by Russell H. Conwell[7] that talked about "Acres of Diamonds" and anyone could get rich if he or she would just bend down and pick up the gems at his/her feet (Carter, 2004). America, to those embracing this particular myth, is already "color blind and gender neutral." Conwell preached, "You ought to be rich; you have no right to be poor" (Conwell, R. H. circa., 1884). If all of the above were true, we could terminate the EEOC and eliminate all affirmative action.

Matthew Fox can be said to have predicted our current problems when he wrote over 30 years ago that without compassion, "economics becomes merely a highly developed form of violence" (Fox, 1979, p. 177). Economics as a social science attempts to base its approach on the scientific method. As such, it is in the business of falsifying hypotheses. However, some economists, including some of the most prominent ones, fall in love with their models/paradigms/theories to such a degree that when these things fail to explain reality the same economists dismiss the data rather than question their hypotheses (Zimarowski James et al., 1993). When this type of behavior occurs, we find ourselves in the land of ideology and myth rather than social science. In short, we need to start telling different stories. It is a matter of national health, and it should be a priority.

Values and ideologies

An ethics perspective is one that is capable of identifying choices that implicate the moral dimension and articulating accurately the impact of those choices on other sentient beings. The moral dimension separates choices that have no need for ethical justification from those that do; in a nutshell, a choice implicates the moral dimension when it raises justice issues or when it causes what may be considered unnecessary suffering for sentient creation. When a society adopts an economic system, the choice manifests our dominant cultural values; and the analysis and evaluation of how the economic system promotes those values is an exercise in ethics. Such an analysis is implied by the submerged nature of many of our society's values in myth and ideology. Similarly, any attempt to justify the choice of one economic approach over another is an exercise in ethics. It is no coincidence that Adam Smith was first and foremost a moral philosopher at Glasgow (Smith, 1982, p. 1).

When a society chooses, for instance, to treat unemployment as a particular rather than fundamental risk, it has made a choice which implies certain values about individuals, the markets, and the proper role of government. Fundamental risks arise from losses that are impersonal in origin and in consequence. These losses are not caused by an individual and their impact falls on an entire group. In contrast, particular risks have their origin in individual events and their impact is felt in localized consequences (Denenberg, 1974, pp. 6–7). Thus, if unemployment is a particular risk, then it could be caused by laziness or lack of training or lack of ability – characteristics of the individuals who are unemployed. But, if a society determines, as the U.S.A. did in the New Deal years (Dubofsky and Dulles, 1984, pp. 272–274), that unemployment is a fundamental risk, then the causes would lie in the malfunctioning of the markets. The stories that represent the dominant cultural view will shift to reflect this social change, but some inertia will be experienced.

Values are strongly held qualities, virtues, or personal characteristics that we admire, defend, and in which we are willing to invest ourselves. Examples might include truth, beauty, promise-keeping, honesty, loyalty, and openness. Even though two individuals may hold the very same value, say loyalty,

they may "operationalize" it differently when they place it into their moral-principles sets (moral codes). One might embrace her value of loyalty in a moral principle such as "I will be loyal to others only so long as their conduct merits my loyalty." The second might take the tact that "True loyalty requires me to be steadfast to those persons whose conduct or position generally deserve loyalty even if I might have to overlook some of their behaviors." Even people who operationalize values similarly may apply the moral precepts differently because of cultural differences or other factors (Wines and Napier, 1992). Thus, the progression from values to behavior has, at least, three steps: (1) value determination; (2) operationalizing of values into moral principles; and (3) application of the moral principle or principles.

A culture's dominant value set may include values which over time have been absorbed into the system of unexamined, core values which are collectively the society's ideology. Rokeach defined a value as "a type of belief, centrally located within one's total belief system, about how one ought or ought not to behave, or about some end-state of existence worth or not worth attaining" (Rokeach, 1972, p. 124). In Rokeach's system for the individual, attitudes operate below the level of consciousness to determine automatic responses (Rokeach, 1972, p. 131). Then, significantly for this paper, Rokeach compares attitudes to theories in science in the following passage:

> An attitude can be likened to a miniature theory in science, having similar functions and similar virtues and vices. An attitude, like a theory, is a frame of reference, saves time because it provides us a basis for induction and deduction, organizes knowledge, has implications for the real world, and changes in the face of new evidence. A theory, like an attitude, is a pre-judgment; it may be selective and biased, it may support the status quo, it may arouse affect when challenged, and it may resist change in the face of new evidence (Rokeach, 1972, p. 131) [emphasis added].

Rokeach then ascribes a value judgment to theories; he says "good" theories are the ones that organize knowledge, reflect reality, and change in the face of new evidence and "bad" theories are biased, arouse emotions when challenged, and resist change in the face of new learning (Rokeach, 1972, p. 131).

A collection of images, expectations, values and assumptions constitutes an ideology. An ideology

simplifies, organizes, evaluates and gives meaning to what would otherwise be a very confusing world, thereby serving a function quite similar to the functions of myth and scientific theories but at a different level of consciousness. An ideology is a generally coherent set of values, beliefs, and hopes (sometimes fears) about how the world <u>does</u> and <u>should</u> work. Sometimes, embracing a certain ideology may be a requirement for belonging to a group. This set of images and expectations may also operate as a kind of map in people's minds, telling them what they are seeing and how to understand and interpret what is happening (Dolbeare and Medcalf, 1988, pp. 3–4).

The mind must have a framework with which to sort and organize new learning (Hirsch, 1987). Without an adequate framework, knowledge required for cultural literacy cannot be gained. It follows that the ideology and theories that one embraces will determine the nature and direction of new learning. George Cabot Lodge argues that

> Ideology serves as the collective unconscious of the community, comprising the underlying bases of its motivation (Lodge, 1986, pp. 8–9).

The political turn to the right in the U.S.A. from 1980 to present includes an embrace of the free-market economic theories advocated by Milton Friedman, George Stigler, Richard Posner, Ronald Coase, and others. When this economic theory is applied reflexively as ideology, it imports <u>without</u> any consideration an entire set of assumptions and moral value choices, the uncritical acceptance of which undermines sound public policy, social health, and general welfare (Reynolds et al., 2004). Stories that accompany economic ideology in the hands of master story tellers have a good chance of becoming mythic. Thus, it is essential for an ethical perspective that the values enmeshed in the myths be examined in the sunlight of cognitive reflection. For a society, it is also important that a balance be achieved between countervailing social, political, and economic ideologies.

Myths at the center of the American Dream

Horatio Alger has been called ''the chief prophet of the American Dream'' (Tebbel, 1963, p. 18). Alger spun out fantasies suited to the boys of the late nineteenth century and set in New York City. One of his biographers addresses the enduring appeal and the ironies of Alger's work in these words:

> For his eager provincial readers, Alger wrote about New York [City] with something of the same wonder he had brought to the city from his native Massachusetts. It *was* a great and wicked city in those days, whereas it is now merely great, and more sin to the square inch can be found in the provincial's own hometown than in any comparable area of Manhattan. There was little of the real New York in Alger's books, but there was enough of it to titillate his young and unsophisticated readers. He gave them the sordid details as long as relations between men and women were not concerned; the prudery of his tales approaches the pathological…

> Against this background of myriad fascinations, Alger spun stories ideally suited to the fantasies of boys growing up in that time and place. How many millions of them must have dreamed of being in the Great City, poor but honest, hungry but talented, with the whole metropolitan oyster waiting to be opened…

> To the Alger hero, experience meant getting ahead in the world and possibly amassing a fortune, in the authentic nineteenth-century manner. Cannily, Alger never carried the fantasy to the point of realization, except for a page or two of summary at the end…

> To his devoted readers, then, Alger gave a combination of exotic background and simple wish fulfillment related in terms anyone with no more than an eighth-grade education could understand. This was the real secret of his success. When he had exhausted New York, he turned to far places which boys would find as intriguing. Australia was as far away as the moon to most of them, and to read of it was like reading science fiction in another generation…

> It is clear, then, that Alger's books did embody the essence of the American Dream in its purest form. [What he came to be celebrated for, however, was precisely what he did not do. He constantly preached that <u>success was to be won through virtue and hard work</u>, but his stories tell us just as constantly that success is actually the result of fortuitous circumstance. His heroes are virtuous beyond belief, and they are compelled to work hard by reason of the sweatshop practices of that era, <u>but it is not virtue and hard work which make the ultimate difference</u>. It is almost always

an incident which brings them to the attention of a successful businessman, who gives them the job which makes the difference between mere struggle and opportunity. After that, there are no further problems. The rest is easy] (John Tebbel, 1963, pp. 13–14) [emphasis added].

One source estimates that approximately 50 million young boys read books by Horatio Alger in the one-hundred years after they were first published. The impact on the American psyche is incalculable.

How pervasive are the myths? In addition to the Alger myths, we Americans tend to mythologize our heroes. One needs only to critically study the lives of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Benjamin Franklin to see how the myths have threatened to engulf the real men. Yet, especially when teaching history to the young, it is tempting to teach the myths. We know the myths and much prefer them to the messy reality. We submit that a large part of the myth has slipped below our horizon of collective consciousness and now informs many of our economic attitudes toward free-market economics, federal regulation, etc. Listen to the words of Horatio Alger's biographer:

> It is ironic that Alger lived in an era when there were enough real products of the American Dream to provide examples for any ambitious boy, yet he could only create the fantasy world of rags to riches, which nevertheless made him successful because it was also the fantasy of so many American boys. He might have written about the careers of such eminences as Peter A. B. Widener and Gustavus Franklin Swift, who rose from meat markets to wealth; or of Thomas Fortune Ryan, who began as an orphaned and penniless boy on a Virginia farm and in twenty years had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange; or John D. Rockefeller, a boy from an Ohio village who became one of the nation's first billionaires. These examples were everywhere in nineteenth-century America, yet Alger wrote about the street boys of New York and their melodramatic, implausible rises to fortune, which in fact actually occurred to a negligible number of them.

> Why did millions of Americans prefer the fantasy to the reality? The answer is of course, the reason for the success of so much popular fiction in that century or this – the inability of the mass mind in America to face reality. Just as we invent a version of American history to satisfy our own image of ourselves, so we prefer the Ragged Dicks of literature to the real heroes of the

American Dream. Until the muckrakers came along at the end of the century, everyone wanted to believe that the great entrepreneurs of business were like Alger heroes. When a later school of writers tried to depict historical figures as something more than stereotypes, they were called debunkers (Tebbel, 1963, p. 16).

Our position is that ''[j]ust as we invent a version of American history to satisfy our image of ourselves,'' (Tebbel, 1963, p. 16) the dominant myths of American commerce provide the raw material from which corporations weave an identity or corporate culture in which they cloak themselves and their actions. Eventually, the distinction between reality and mythical culture become blurred. As John Wayne discovered, first he and John Ford created a myth; then he lived the myth; and finally the myth defined him (Wills, 1997).

Myths define corporate character and cultures

What relationships exist, if any, between the world of myth as we have defined it and the world of the large, modern for-profit corporation? Myth, as noted earlier, is the set of interlocking stories, rituals, rites, and customs that inform and give the pivotal sense of meaning and direction to a community or culture. In many ways, stories/myths tell corporations how they must act to be part of an industry; stories define corporate culture in much the same way that stories define Cheyenne culture or Irish-American culture; and, finally, corporations spend vast amounts of money to hire professional story tellers to publish and polish their public images. For instance, how would one talk about Marlboro cigarettes without discussing the Marlboro man? How do we explain General Mills and its enduring success without getting into the story of Betty Crocker? (Gray, 1954, 170 *et seq*). One of the main premises in this paper is that an understanding of corporate mythology can be used to explain corporate culture, to predict large patterns in corporate behavior, and even to change corporate culture by changing the dominant corporate stories, legends, and myths. If we know, for instance, the national or regional identity of a corporation, then we can explore the myths that define that identity in much the same way that one would expect a cultural anthropologist

to do it for a newly discovered tribe. If it is a Japanese steel firm, then the stories that give meaning to the corporate identity and culture can be explored and will be different than if we are discussing a Danish Brewing firm.

One of the pressing issues in firms moving into international markets is that the stories they identify with at home frequently do not cross the cultural barrier; some do but many others do not. Just product names will suffice to illustrate the problems: Rolls Royce Silver Mist did not sell in Germany where the word "mist" translates as manure; similarly Chevrolet's Nova did not sell in Spanish-speaking countries where Nova means "does not go."[8] If simple labels do not cross language barriers, one can imagine the difficulties with complex things such as stories, rites, and rituals.

Yet, corporate cultures are, usually, much more than the shadows of individual men. What it means to be a Westerner in the U.S.A. is infused with myth in the same way that a logger takes much of his identity not only from history but from a history infused with the mythology of logging camps and the big woods. Bruce Catton, the Pulitzer-Prize winning historian, describes the spring logging drives going through his backyard in Michigan shortly after the turn of the century. There was danger, bravado, the power of the river, the immense skill of the river men with their pikes and hobnail boots. Occasionally men would be maimed trying to clear log jams; sometimes drowning resulted when someone fell off the log boom and was kept under water by the logs that covered the Manistee River shore to shore and for miles upstream (Catton, 1972).

In a similar vein, what it means to be a Westerner is not a simple geographical inquiry. The "American West" is not a place in time nor is it a geographical area but rather it is a place in the mind. Men who have not lived in Texas for decades describe themselves defiantly as Texans; others are Westerners by choice and by attitude. A Westerner usually exhibits a majority of the following traits: a highly sensitive pride; devotion to personal redress of wrongs; vigilantism; the doctrine of no duty to retreat; the homestead ethic; the belief in individual enterprise; and an embrace of the *Code of the West* – a code that places extreme value on a violent and reckless bravado that passes for courage.[9]

Why are myths and stories so powerful for conveying values and identities?

Our experiences make us reasonably confident that stories are more powerful as ways of transmitting values, confirming identities, and encouraging behavior than mere admonitions or even commands. Iceland is one of the few, if not the only, western nations that does not have major problems with sexual harassment against women. Iceland is virtually alone in having national myths in which women are relatively authoritative and influential. Women were not dominant or even equal in the Icelandic sagas, but they were more prominent than in other ancient writings (Koester, 1995, p. 574). "A substantial body of writing addresses the subject of the status of women in ancient Scandinavian and Germanic society. Commentators on the success of the feminist movement in Iceland today,…, typically assert that it derives from this ancient heritage" (Koester, 1995, p. 574).

In the movie "Goodnight and Good luck," Edward R. Murrow (played by David Strathairn) in one of his 1953 CBS segments against McCarthyism stated, "We Americans are not descended from fearful men" (Warner Independent Pictures, 2005). We find this a more powerful way to admonish his listeners "to not be afraid" than merely scolding them. In the Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln stated, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." The dramatic tension of that narrative captured the essence of his time in a powerful and memorable fashion. For contrast, imagine what the effect might have been if Lincoln had merely said "The current war tests the assumption of our nation's founding."

Story telling is in our nature; it is in our genes. Listen to a Hasidic tale as told frequently by Elie Wiesel and related by one of his students, Albert Friedlander:

> "When the Great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening his people, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished, and misfortune averted.

"Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezrich, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Ruler of the universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then, it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to god: I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story. And this must be sufficient. And it was sufficient.

God made us because he loves stories."

Well, here we are: god's children who love stories. We come to a place in the dark forest of the world; we light a fire, say a prayer, and ask for Divine help. And if [we] have forgotten everything, there is still the story. _The last line, of course, is Elie's special teaching for us_ [Emphasis added]. In a world of cultural amnesia, of consciously forgetting the darkness around us, and the darkness within us, we can still reach out, as a company of seekers, and ask God for help (Friedlander, 1999).

Telling new and different stories in organizations

The Cadbury illustration

One of the most respected business ethicists in the USA has seriously argued that the primary purpose for being of a corporation is to provide meaningful employment to its workers (Bowie, 1991, p. 19). Imagine the impact of making this "story" as much a required text as the story about the invisible hand or the importance of the bottom line.

The culture of the Cadbury, now part of Cadbury Schweppes, is a positive example of the creation of a corporate culture by story telling based upon selected events, appropriate and uncontested events, which emphasized the Quaker traditions of the Cadbury family to give meaning to the firm's labor-management institutions (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993). The major part of the article demonstrates how Cadbury, a British confectionery company well known for its Quaker traditions, invented its corporate culture by attributing historical significance to Cadbury family's Quaker beliefs after the fact. At the conclusion, the authors stated:

in constructing a history the firm was able to draw on appropriate and uncontested events in its past to differentiate itself from other companies. The success of the company's invented culture is indicated by the continued acceptance of its constructed history by business historians and corporate culture writers alike. This represents a considerable achievement. Those attempting to effect cultural change in the present without regard to the past **want culture on the cheap**; by mere exhortation they hope to create a firm-specific identity, without having invested in any material practices that could be given a firm-specific meaning" (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993, p. 322).

One of our favorite stories out of the Cadbury company history involves an ethical dilemma resolved by Sir Adrian Cadbury's grandfather in the year 1900. His grandfather was publicly and strongly opposed to the Anglo-Boer war. He went so far as to buy a newspaper, the only British newspaper that opposed the war. But in 1900, Queen Victoria wanted to send a tin of Cadbury chocolate to her soldiers who were serving in the war in South Africa. Cadbury was then the second largest chocolate company in Britain, and Cadbury's workers could use the extra pay for the Queen's project.

This dilemma is an example of an ethical dilemma of the second kind (Wines, 2006, p. 6). One principle would be to provide extra work for the workers and to expand the business. The second and opposing principle would have been to do nothing to support the war and not to profit from suffering and death. Sir Adrian's grandfather resolved the dilemma by accepting the royal project but doing it at no profit to the owners (he and his family). The result was that the company workers got the extra pay, Queen Victoria made the gift, the soldiers each got a tin with a wrapped chocolate bar inside, and the Cadburys (Quakers all) made not one single pence from the war (Cadbury, 1987).

The unintended power of stories in academia

A former Department Chair at a Southeastern university talked about changing the culture of his department from "research is all that matters" to one in which good teaching also had value – even if not the primary value. He started by getting rid of anonymous student Scantron evaluations (Wines and Lau, 2006). The anonymous student evaluations were followed by a peer evaluation process.

The new peer evaluation process involved four steps. First, the peer evaluators received training for the evaluation. Second, the peer evaluators met with the professor/instructor whose class was to be observed. During that meeting, the peer observers asked the instructor what was going to be covered in the class, what the objectives were, what pedagogical approaches were to be used, and other questions. Third, the observation of the class took place.

Fourth and last, the peer evaluators met with the instructor to debrief the instructor about what they saw and to provide some suggestions for improving teaching. The entire process took about four to five hours. The former chair recalled that, as feared, "all the peer evaluations were nearly perfect." Then, he smiled and said "but a funny thing happened: teaching got better and good teaching got some recognition it had not gotten."

Asked "why" by his listeners, the former department chair said, "for one thing, when they got together for the debriefing, the faculty peer evaluators started telling stories about good teaching and good teachers. "For another, these faculty members spent five hours each term thinking about their teaching and focusing on the subject of teaching – an amount of time not previously dedicated to that subject." The result, it seemed to him, was a slight culture shift that promoted good teaching and, as a result of the shared stories about great teaching moments or good teaching ideas, good teaching started getting some new appreciation.

The peer evaluations were not the heart of the matter. What brought about this small cultural shift was the process that had gotten faculty, who previously lived and breathed only for their research, to open up their professional lives to include a second dimension – teaching. Some times, managers or administrators are on the verge of getting the result they want – but only if they are patient and open to the possibility that the result may come about in an unanticipated manner and for reasons they had not foreseen.

Suggestions for effective corporate storytelling

Only with counterbalancing ideological assumptions are organizational managers likely to create an ethical culture within the organization or firm and empower employees to resist individual and organizational pressures to act unethically and illegally. How can we go about telling new stories to make our corporate cultures healthier and less prone to legal and ethical meltdowns? Given the difficulties that Professor Amitai Etzioni had teaching a business ethics class for Harvard MBAs (Etzioni, 1989), we might be forgiven some skepticism regarding how well received our suggestions for changing corporate stories, legends, and myths will be.

As we have noted, the problem with ethics and legal compliance is not that the people in business or universities do not know how to use their specialized knowledge and skills well (Wines and Hamilton, 2004). In fact, the problem is, in part, that they possess such specialized knowledge that the asymmetry in skills between the practitioner and his/her customer and between the practitioner and the regulators is so great that the usual checks on ethical and legal behavior provided by consumers and regulators is much weaker. A great deal of the motivation to be ethical and to comply with the law has to come from the practitioners themselves. What kind of understanding would lead the practitioner to exercise such self-restraint, especially when the getting and growing of money is so much a part of business and, especially lately, also education and NGO's?

The stories that professors tell as well as priests, poets, and playwrights eventually become strands in the intellectual fabric of the next generation. One way to develop a balanced or countervailing ideological stance is for the *new* (for lack of a better label) corporate stories to mesh, that is, be compatible with the dominant national and regional myths. For the new corporate stories to work, they must be re-told and must be credible. To achieve these goals, the new stories should not clash with the accepted larger stories, legends, and myths of the industry or society

as a whole. For evidence, see the international marketing disasters related above in which well-established cultural assumptions clashed with product identifications. Faced with a society hostile to the values the organization wishes to foster, an alternative is to include in the stories a ''remnant'' aspect (such as that contained in religious cultures like Judaism and Christianity) celebrating the difference of the organization and its potential to be the leaven that brings about change in the industry or society. The Cadbury story could have been told to emphasize this remnant aspect.

Secondly, the history of the corporation should support the new stories, whenever possible. The effectiveness of the Cadbury resolution to the Boer War order from Queen Victoria was due, in part, to the historical accuracy of it. Motorola employees are told of instances in the firm's early years when the founder made payroll from his personal funds and when the company turned down a lucrative contract because of the kickbacks required to secure it, incidents which reinforce values emphasized by the contemporary managers of the firm (Moorthy et al., 1998). When writing a corporate history, some stories will be included and some will, of necessity, be excluded. The themes that are developed in the selection of the stories that are included point the direction for the current generation. That is what dominant stories, myths, and legends do – by definition.

Thirdly, the new stories should demonstrate the application of desirable, morally positive, values to issues typically arising in the corporate ventures. All organizations, just like all people, have established value sets. How these value sets are ''operationalized'' – how the values are applied is a function of the moral principles that have been generated to make the abstract values useful. The ''operationalizing'' principles are really moral codes, i.e., sets of moral rules. To move an organization further away from the temptations of moral or legal meltdowns, the new stories should be instructive, illustrative of successful application of core organizational values. Motorola's training manual followed its discussion of the values making up the Motorola culture with a set of case studies an employee might face along with commentary by ethics consultants on how the firm's values might be used to resolve the issues raised (Moorthy et al., 1998). Conoco used the dissemi-nation of information regarding the nominees for its President's Award for Business Ethics as stories of creative solutions to ethical problems to its employees. E-mails describing actions for which employees were disciplined or terminated were sent to all employees to show what responses were unacceptable (Hill et al., 2006). Lockheed Martin had small groups at each level of the company decide what would be the most effective ending of brief stories of ethical situations. Employees discussed not only what was right or wrong but also whether to report the matter to the ethics office, an immediate supervisor, or to personally intervene in the situation in order to bring about a resolution (Lockheed Martin Ethics Challenge, 1998). One expert from the Harvard Business School has declared that ''We learn best – and change – from hearing stories that strike a chord within us'' (Kotter, 2006). Thinking about how to correctly apply moral principles is an exercise not only in critical thinking but also in ethics (Wines, 2006).

Finally, the new stories should have impact, some emotional power (Kotter, 2006). The more effective the stories are, the more often they will be repeated. Eventually, they may become part of the corporate ideology – the reflexive, subconscious application of values to problems. Aristotle had observed and knew this process. We tend to become what we do. Rokeach called it habit. A truly honest man does not need to think about giving back excess, incorrect change. It happens naturally. The better stories, the ones with emotional impact or ''grabbing'' power, will be told more often, better remembered, and more quickly become assimilated into the culture.

Conclusions

We are a nation that worships material success. ''[I]n spite of all the hypocrisy to the contrary the values of the materially successful remain our national values'' (Tebbel, 1963, p. 17). Adam Smith wrote that the awarding of respect and admiration to wealth and greatness instead of wisdom and virtue combined with the heaping of contempt upon poverty and weakness instead of upon vice and folly have been the complaints of moralists in all ages (Adam Smith, 1982, p. 126). With the help of Horatio Alger, Americans know that riches are a reward for virtue

and hard work. The Protestant Ethic lives on, supported by a large cast of characters – mostly mythic.

Max Weber, the great German sociologist and thinker, attempted to demonstrate that people's worldviews or values determined their history. To use Bloom's words: "spirit compel[led] matter rather than the other away around." If this is true, and we suspect there is substantial truth in it, then the stories we tell ourselves become vastly more important than is usually thought; and the exploration of business ethics must, of necessity, include an inquiry into the land of stories.

Notes

[1] Bloom (1987, pp. 199–201).
[2] Reich (1987, p. 40).
[3] Keen and Valley-Fox (1989, p ix).
[4] Culkin, J. as quoted in Edmund Carpenter, *They Became What They Beheld* (Outerbridge & Dienstfrey/Ballantine: New York, 1970) in a section entitled "The Islander" found about 10 pages into the book which is not paginated. This aphorism is popularly associated with the late Marshall McLuhan. See, e.g., a website that lists it as one of "McLuhan's favorite aphorisms" found at http://scanblog.blogspot.com/2004/07/marshall-mcluhan.html (last accessed on 6/19/2008). John M. Culkin (1928–1993) was a friend and colleague of Marshall McLuhan for many years.
[5] In the fall of 1980, we were present when a new college president in his first address to the college community boasted that he "did not know anything about labor contracts and did not intend to learn." The college had three major union contracts covering an overwhelming majority of employees in a state that was a traditional union stronghold. The new president lasted about 14 months in that position, in no small part because of an incredible surge in union grievances.
[6] Puzo, M. the author of the book, and Francis Ford Coppola, the director of the movie, improved on the dialogue from the form it took in the book when they wrote the screen play for the Oscar-winning movie. In the book, *The Godfather*, Puzo wrote, "Sollozzo nodded gravely. 'Fine,' he said, 'I don't like bloodshed, I'm a businessman and blood costs too much money'" (Puzo, 1969, p. 88).
[7] Russell H. Conwell served as an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War. After the war, he studied law, worked as a journalist, and traveled. In 1884, he founded Temple University in Philadelphia. See "Russell H. Conwell" by Prof. Joseph C. Carter, accessed at http://www.temple.edu/about/temples_founder.html on 3-2-2004.
[8] *Newsweek* (March 17, 1997). p. 8 lists over a dozen products with brand names that will not cross the barrier onto U.S. grocery store shelves. Examples include: "Alu-Fanny" (French foil wrap); "Crapsy Fruit" (French cereal); and "Happy End" (German toilet paper).
[9] *See* Chap 9 on "The Ethos of Violence" in Wines (2006), pp. 123–139; *see also* Chap 11 "Violence" by Richard Maxwell Brown in *The Oxford History of the American West*, Milner II, Clyde et al. (eds.) (1994), pp. 392–425.

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