

Storytelling:

Exploring the Multiple Layers of Cultural Worldviews

William G. Nicoll, Ph.D.

Resilience Counseling & Training Center

[Originally published in the International Association for Counselling Newsletter, Summer 2021]

The basic need of all humans is to belong and feel valued as a worthwhile member of the cultural groups in which we are embedded. This requires learning about, and adapting to, the shared worldviews of our primary cultural groups. Cultural worldview is defined as a complex whole of collectively held patterns of beliefs, values, apperceptions, and behaviors shared by a particular social group.

The concept of culture is thus very much entwined with personality. Personality consists of the values, beliefs, and apperceptions that create one's idiosyncratic behavior patterns and attitudes. Personality is our personal "cognitive schema" for understanding self, life, others, and social interactions. In other words, it is our "personal worldview" which develops within the contexts of a complex array of layers of cultural worldviews (e.g. ethnic, racial, religious, socioeconomic, geographic, familial, etc.).

Storytelling has long served as a primary means for enculturating successive generations. Examining these stories, folktales, and fables can thus help reveal the cultural worldviews which influenced our personality development. The process is much like peeling away the layers of an onion. We proceed from the larger ethnic and religious cultural contexts through the family cultural worldview and finally to the individual's idiosyncratic worldview. Each layer is embedded in the larger cultural worldviews.

At the broader cultural levels, traditional children's stories, fables, folktales, and religious parables serve to transmit the shared cultural worldview. For example, the story of "*The Three Little Pigs*" transmits the value of the protestant work ethic. At its core, it is about work before play for security. A traditional Bantu tale from Africa tells of a chameleon, lion, and chicken surviving a famine. The cultural value on ingenuity and cooperation necessary to survive harsh life circumstances is thus transmitted. Religious stories and parables similarly serve the function of transmitting a religion's worldview.

Cultural differences are also revealed in these traditional fables and folktales. For example, in western cultures there is the fable of the "*Tortoise and the Hare*". The hare (rabbit) quickly gains a large lead in the race and decides to nap while the slow and steady effort of the tortoise enables him to pass the sleeping hare and "win the race"! In contrast, Native American culture has a quite different version of this story. A coyote races a tortoise and bear. The coyote rests but then rapidly passes the other animals each of whom has encountered a problem. When the coyote crosses the finish line, nobody celebrates his win. Instead, the Great Spirit tells him to rerun the race, which he does. But this time, he stops to help the other animals such that they can all cross the finish line together. Only then do the forest animals all come out to celebrate; a tale of compassion and helping one another for all to succeed as opposed to individual victory.

So, take a moment now and reflect upon the unique cultural folktales from your culture, religion, and so forth. What are the prevailing messages conveyed to you and to your clients?

A second cultural layer is that of the family culture. It is through the family system that the many larger cultures influencing our development are integrated and assigned degrees of salience. Families transmit their unique family worldview by telling children stories about incidents in the lives of older relatives

(i.e., family folk tales). Embedded in such family stories is the family culture message as to what qualities are valued, what one should strive to be, and what one should never be like.

For example, a single mother came to counselling concerned that she always felt depressed, “not good enough.” Her family story was of a great, great grandmother who, in the 19th century, loaded an oxen-drawn wagon with all the family’s possessions and, alone, drove her three sons from Philadelphia to the western territories. There, she staked a claim, cleared the land, built a log cabin and successfully raised her sons while running that farm all by herself. And then came the clincher, “*and yet she was still known for baking the best muffins in the entire northwest territories.*” The message was clear! The standard for a woman in her family was to be both the epitome of a hard-working father/male and of the nurturing mother/female – a difficult standard to meet indeed! So, what are the cultural messages embedded in the family stories you were told as a child? And, what cultural messages are embedded in the stories you now choose to tell your children?

Within these larger cultural contexts, we then develop our personal worldview, our personality. Self-developed stories about events in our childhood subconsciously serve to remind ourselves as to our goals, values, and expectations – yet another layer of storytelling. We create and retell stories of one-time only childhood events as reminders of our personal worldview.

An example is the early childhood story told by a never married, depressed, and fearful middle-aged woman still living at home with her ageing parents. Her story was of the time she was alone in her yard and the boy next door and his father invited her to join them on a walk through the forest. As they walked, she marveled at the beauty of the forest. But suddenly, they came across two rusted old car frames: “How can something so ugly be in the middle of such beauty?” Frightened, she recalled running home vowing never to go out there again. The story served to remind her of the belief that no matter how nice things look, they will eventually turn ugly and dangerous; therefore, isolate and be vigilant so as to be safe! This story led to discovering the true source of her problems, childhood sexual molestation by a doting grandfather. So, what do your “personal folktales” reveal about your worldview? And what do those of your clients reveal as to their personal worldview?

Finally, the issue of cultural transmission via storytelling begs the question as to what worldview messages are now transmitted via the stories told through the media (e.g., TV, movies)? And, what cultural messages are embedded in the stories we choose for enculturating children in our schools (e.g. in history and literature classes)? Do we focus primarily on male accomplishments, military victories and conquerors, and the atrocities of “villains”? Or, do we also tell the stories of female accomplishments and of those caring individuals who bravely chose to help others in times of need such as Sir Nicholas Winton (UK), Georg Duckwitz & Hans Hofstadler (Germany & Denmark), Paul Rosesbagina (Rwanda), Irena Sendler (Poland), and Harriet Tubman (USA)?

Exploring the stories we were told can aid in understanding the cultural perspectives that have impacted our lives and those of our clients. Consciously rethinking which stories we choose to tell children today can perhaps help us enculturate the next generation with transcultural values and positive worldviews.