

Oracy in the New Millennium: Storytelling Revival in America and Bhutan

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Abstract

Starting in the 1970s there has been a significant wave of storytelling revivalism in the United States, Canada, and across much of Western Europe. Drawing on earlier revivals of oral traditional or “folk” music, dance, and crafts, this revival has spawned a new class of free-lance professional storytellers along with a broader network of enthusiasts who make use of oral stories as tools in a variety of amateur and applied professional settings (especially education, business, ministry, and health care). Because this revival has taken root in an advanced technological society with a longstanding commitment to (if not actual realization of) universal literacy, it occupies a cultural position that blends conservative and radical elements. Storytellers affirm their commitment to traditional values of community memory, interconnectedness, localism, and ethnic heritage, while at the same time placing these attitudes in the service of potentially hegemonic, homogenizing forces. This paper will explore these paradoxical forces at work in the American storytelling movement, and reflect on their implications for emergent storytelling work in the context of the Kingdom of Bhutan.

These reflections are being composed on the occasion of this first Bhutan Storytelling Conference/Festival, held in the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu, at the end of June 2009. Bhutan’s road to constitutional monarchy, democratic self-government, and modernization is already well-paved, and initial journeys are underway in the direction of universal suffrage and universal literacy – which some would say amounts to the same phenomenon, since it is difficult to make use of a ballot without being able to read one. This conference signals the existence of a unprecedented interest

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in cultural conservation and self-reliance, in line with the core principles of the Kingdom's Gross National Happiness model. The spark for it comes from the idea, as Evans clearly presents it, that a people's traditional folktales contain the seeds of appropriate judgments, relationships, attitudes, and instincts; they help relieve psychological stresses, ease social tensions, and resolve cultural contradictions, and promote personal and community happiness.

In this paper I will explore the cycle of cultural revitalization, first as a general theoretical model of cultural stress and renewal, then in particular as it pertains to storytelling as a self-consciously organized cultural practice in the United States. I will examine the influences of dominant technologies of culture in stimulating or repressing the cycle of storytelling revitalization during two notable such revival periods, from 1890-1925 and from the early 1970s till the present. Finally I will draw certain broad parallels and distinctions between the American experience and that of the Kingdom of Bhutan, whose nascent organization of storytelling practices for purposes of national cultural well-being is what brings us together here.

Starting in the 1970s there has been a significant wave of storytelling revivalism in the United States, Canada, and across much of Western Europe. Drawing on earlier revivals of oral traditional or "folk" music, dance, and crafts, this revival has spawned a new class of free-lance professional storytellers along with a broader network of enthusiasts who make use of oral stories as tools in a variety of amateur and applied professional settings (especially education, business, ministry, and health care). Because this revival has taken root in an advanced technological society with a longstanding commitment to (if not actual realization of) universal literacy, it occupies a cultural position that blends conservative and radical elements. Storytellers affirm their commitment to traditional values of community memory, interconnectedness, localism, and ethnic heritage, while at the same time placing

these attitudes in the service of potentially hegemonic, homogenizing forces. This paper will explore these paradoxical forces at work in the American storytelling movement, and reflect on their implications for emergent storytelling work in the context of the Kingdom of Bhutan.

It would be worthwhile here to say a bit about how technologies of cultural transmission operate to form a perceptual matrix for societies that employ them. For societies do not simply employ their fundamental technologies, they are in a definitive sense employed by them, or more precisely they are constituted and constructed on essential cognitive levels by the technologies in which their cultural activities are conducted.

To illustrate: oral traditions must be carried on in small group, face-to-face interactive contexts. In the absence of mediums of storage such as print or electronic recording there would be no other ways to transmit the materials of oral culture than by the interaction of tradition-bearers with those who share their language and customs. These interactions are generally purposeful, ritually organized, and even when apparently casual or informal they are guided and circumscribed by a host of customary norms, protocols, rules of respect and appropriate behavior. These are not arbitrary, but are naturally evolved and enduring precisely on the basis of creating conditions of interdependence within which traditions may be sustained. These kinds of face-to-face community gatherings thus constitute the perceptual framework of the culture—they generate the tone and the web of relationships that are the very fabric of which the community is made.

Manuscript culture generates a whole different fabric of relationships and activities, one far more dependent on the solitary communion of individuals with the medium of writing, copying, and reading. The individual begins to take a new focus in cultural life, a focus that is heightened by the

mechanical precision and proliferation of print. Monastic and scholastic frameworks take shape as means of ensuring the training and maintenance of individuals and communities suited to receive and transmit cultures of the Book. Since book learning is highly intensive in its solitary cultivation, it is necessarily at odds with the long seasonal labors of agricultural work. Cultures of high literacy thus tend to breed scholarly and religious elites, usually separated from lower caste majorities who receive the sacred wisdoms of the culture through oral and iconographic mediations. Here again, the actions of writing and reading become a primary framework within which those initiated into the culture conceive and experience the fabric of self and society. There is an introjective element to reading/writing that opens up new dimensions of inner life. There is also a projective element, in that it opens up dimensions of the outer world that are neither available to the immediate senses nor framed by the immediate social environment; thus it broadens the perceiver's relationship with objective dimensions of time and space.

The television, and in accelerated senses the online environment, constitute society in vastly different, transformative ways. MacLuhan called them "haptic," meaning kinetic, palpable, hyper-stimulating as if transpiring on the perceiver's very skin. These are iconographic, non-analytic, even anti-analytic media, in the sense that the moving images succeed and replace one another in such tumbling, headlong rhythm as to leave little or no time for sustained analytic metabolism – one simply learns to surf the images and respond emotionally, viscerally, as one plays a video game and sends text messages with one's guts and one's thumbs. Because they are primarily iconographic, meaning is embodied and condensed primarily into images – which make them instantaneous and anti-elite; and in fact in thoroughly media-saturated cultures we can see the age-old structures of elite religious/educational institutions breaking down and becoming merely vestigial, nostalgic shadows of

their previous definitive significance. New elites have formed based on iconographic presences within the media complexes themselves (celebrity culture); and as this process advances we see the former literate signifiers of age, authority, gravitas, wisdom, literacy itself ebbing to be replaced by youth, physical vitality, rhythm, sex appeal, the tactile visual surfaces of the human form as compositional center of the moving image.

There seems to be cyclic pattern to technological innovation and the concomitant cultural transformation that such innovations bring. I will offer here a necessarily foreshortened outline of that cycle for the purpose of introducing a central theme. At the beginning of a cycle there is accelerating excitement and restlessness that ripples through the cultural fabric, a wave of disaffection from old ways and alienation from longstanding traditions, as younger generations absorb themselves in new technologies that will come to constitute their medium of expression and community. As these generations grow into stations of power and influence, the new technology assumes a naturalized place as a medium of ideas and expression. Gradually there is ushered in a mature phase in which a technology has established itself as a dominant strand of cultural life. Its masterful exponents are celebrated and rewarded with authoritative roles in the public discourse; their works become canonic, and are studied in institutions of "higher learning." In this mature phase of a cultural technology the culture itself becomes identified with these key canonic figures, works, and forms, and it is generally forgotten that they were once proponents and products of an exotic, insurgent technological framework.

But as a technology begins to age, as its forms and rituals rigidify and lose their creative elasticity, a new kind of disaffection begins to emerge in the cultural pattern. I will suggest that it is at this ebb tide of a cycle of technological change, when weariness of saturation by a mature dominant technology overtakes the children of an elite, that oral

traditional revivalism blossoms forth, and that this blossoming, while summoning back to an earlier cultural configuration, also presages and prepares the ground for new developments that are still embryonic within the unconscious of the revivalists and the culture at large.

The recourse to traditional folklore and storytelling is common in times of social change and resultant stress. Sociologist Anthony F.C. Wallace's model of revitalization sets this idea in a clear matrix of cultural evolution and revolution, or, one might say decay and regeneration. "Revitalization," he wrote, is defined as a deliberate, conscious, organized effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." He uses the analogy of societies as corporate organisms, and regards revitalization movements as homeostatic responses on the organisms' part to correct for conditions of social stress. "A society will work by means of coordinated actions (including 'cultural' actions) by all or some of its parts, to preserve its own integrity by maintaining minimally fluctuating life-supporting matrix for its individual members, and will, under stress, take emergency measures to preserve the constancy of its matrix. Stress is defined as a condition in which some part or the whole of the social organism is threatened with more or less serious damage." Wallace identifies a distinct sequence of phases that precipitate and articulate a cultural revitalization movement, including a preceding "steady state" or equilibrium, period of increasing stress on individuals and groups, period of distortion operating on the culture as a whole, period of revitalization through a new vision of society based on revived, imported, or innovated models, resulting in reorganization along divergent lines, leading ultimately to a new steady state.

I entered the storytelling field during one such period of revitalization in the United States, which began over thirty-five years ago and continues to unfold its karmic consequences into the present day. It was a revitalization that

began at a very different stage of modernization from the one that has embarked upon in Bhutan, and it is one with a significantly different overall trajectory; yet because of the convergence of forces of technology and globalization around the world, some of the results and coordinates of our distinct storytelling revitalizations may end up converging as well. So it may be useful to compare and to contrast the storytelling movements in America and Bhutan, to examine their potential growth and developments, and to make some predictions and suggestions concerning the patterns and the choices involved.

The phase of the contemporary American storytelling movement that began in the 1970s emerged from the shadows of a time of great social change and unrest. The 1960s had been a decade of wars abroad and near-warfare at home over a spectrum of cultural divisions. As I wrote in my history of the storytelling movement, *The Storytellers' Journey*, "The [background] of the storytelling revival was the cultural turbulence of the sixties. Accelerating changes in the technological, social, and economic organization of mainstream America all seemed to be enforcing a rapid decline in conditions supportive of traditional storytelling. Chief among those changes were the shift from rural to urban and suburban communities; the shift from extended to nuclear families; increased social mobility leading to a decline in local, regional, and ethnic particularity; and the growing dominance of electronic media and the consequent decline in the cultural value of the spoken and written word." This may not sound unfamiliar in the context of present-day Bhutan. But in addition to these social trends there were also the background factors of the Vietnam War abroad and antiwar movement at home, the movement for civil rights for African-Americans and Native Americans, the rise of feminism, gay rights, ecological activism, drug subcultures, eastern and western religious revivals, and a host of similar counter-cultural movements danced to a soundtrack of folk or rock music festivals, alternative lifestyles, and guerrilla arts.

The technological background of the 1970s storytelling revival is worth commenting upon in particular. Television had emerged as the dominant technological medium of American culture in the 1950s. By the end of that decade the medium had been interiorized by a significant portion of the sentient population, meaning that it occupied a controlling position in both our outward cultural and inner imaginative landscapes. By the sixties the medium had matured, with its theorization by Marshall MacLuhan and others. One of MacLuhan's axioms was that technological environments are invisible to those who inhabit them, becoming part of the unexamined habitual fabric of perception; but we might extend that by noting that once they do become visible to the inhabitants, by way of self-conscious theoretical and critical reflections such as those by MacLuhan himself, the dominant medium will likely have passed its point of saturation of the cultural matrix, and may well be on its way to replacement by new technological configurations.

By the 70s there was a sense of weariness and disenchantment with television and its effects. The phrase "a vast wasteland" (Minow) was popular among critics of the media terrain. A movement of resistance spread through many strata of the culture, exemplified by various counter-cultural movements of which storytelling constituted itself as one of the gentler. "Kill your Television" bumper stickers appeared in great number, affixed to the fenders of back-to-the-landers' camper vans. Storytelling answered directly to this widespread counter-cultural weariness with the technological status quo of medium and message. The intensity of effect that storytelling had on its adherents during that initial revival period, often described in terms of numinous spirituality, may be related to the sensory reorganization experienced in the initial encounter with the live interactive oral medium, a reorganization which carries a distinct "psychedelic" charge, without the harmful side-effects of psychedelic drugs – more akin to group meditation and

guided visualization, which also made major inroads into American culture during the same period.

To further illuminate this cycle of technology and culture we may need to go back a full cycle to a previous period of storytelling revival in America. At the end of the 19th century and for the first two decades of the 20th century there was a period of storytelling popularization in many ways strikingly similar to the movement of recent decades. Between 1890 and 1925, storytelling was established in the United States as an essential component of public library work with children. But it was also being practiced extensively in schools, through the urging of influential educators such as Friedrich Froebel (founder of the kindergarten movement), Felix Adler (founder of the Ethical Culture Society), John Dewey at Columbia University and G. Stanley Hall of Clarke University. Storyteller-educator Richard Thomas Wyche founded the National Storytelling League, an association of amateur storytellers, at a gathering of primary school teacher at the University of Tennessee in 1903. Artist-storytellers such as Marie Shedlock, Seumas MacManus, and Ruth Sawyer toured the country performing for children and for adults. Numerous books on the theory and practice of storytelling were published to great acclaim, including works by Shedlock, Wyche, and Bryant. Re-reading these works today, we do not simply see a pragmatic assessment of the uses of storytelling in fostering literacy and good citizenship – we also see glimmerings of the kind of oral revivalist fervor that has animated our recent storytelling movements. A few of these works were still in print when the latter day revival began in the 1970s, providing inspiration and encouragement as well as instruction and repertoire. But the breadth of popular acceptance and enthusiasm that once surrounded the art and led to the generation of that body of literature had by the time of the new awakening been mostly forgotten.

That earlier movement occurred at an earlier stage of technological saturation. At that time print was the dominant

medium of American and European culture. It was a mature technology, in that it had been greatly interiorized by a preponderance of the urban and rural populations. Literacy was widespread, even universal in certain social spheres; but there were non-literate immigrant populations pouring into American cities; and among the social elites there was a widely distributed fear of resulting social disintegration. One homeostatic response on the part of the conservators of culture was the public library movement. It was founded and supported by certain dominant social interests, such as steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, patron of the Carnegie Library system. This effort supported urban populations, both middle class and the working poor in their assimilation to the dominant cultural forms, through providing subsidized public spaces in which to internalize the culture of books. These early libraries were constructed along the lines of Roman temples. Like railway terminals, which memorialized the transport technologies fundamental to the construction of empires, the library buildings memorialized the reproductive technologies of writing and reading which enabled and constituted what Barthes called “the Empire of Signs,” that is, the common perceptual and interpretive frameworks that made imperial power conceivable and sustainable.

It was discovered in the course of the building of the library systems that the most powerful method for initiating children of the non-literate working classes to books was through the gateway of oral performance. So, in addition to the more missionary story work taking place in schools, on playgrounds, and in settlement houses in the immigrant slums of Boston, New York, and Chicago, elaborate rituals of oral representation were created in the public libraries, enacting a ritualized submission of oral traditions to the sacramental ascendancy of the book. Here is how that ritual was conducted, according to the model set by the Storytelling Section of the New York Public Library, which early on assumed the role of monastic seat of the old order of library storytelling. The teller would set up a chair for herself, beside

a table with a white tablecloth and a crystal bowl filled with water and cut flowers. Upon the table she (nearly always a she) would neatly stack the books from which each of the stories selected for the afternoon's program were to be taken. Children would be gathered, often to the sound of a little hand-held bell. The storyteller would raise the first book. She would show the book to the children, clearly recite the title and the author and say a few carefully chosen words about their background. Then she would place the book upright on its spine upon the table, where its status as the free-standing source of the story in progress would be clearly marked. The storyteller would not read directly from the book, but would recite the author's words from memory exactly as they appeared in the text, the book standing upright beside her as if looking on with an author's right of approval or disapproval. When that story was done she would gently close the standing book and lay it back down. She would raise the next book and repeat the ritual cycle until the story hour program was complete. Then she would ring the bell, dismissing the children. She would remove the books and the cut flowers from the table until the next story hour program was set to begin (Alvey).

This was the library story hour as codified by the heads of Children's Services at the New York Public Library, a lineage so mandarin and venerated within the fold that, as in a Nyingma school, many librarian-storytellers can recite it by heart: Anne Carroll Moore founded the service and handed the mantle to Francis Clarke Sayers, who passed it to Mary Gould Davis, who anointed Augusta Baker, etc. It remained a dominant model within American storytelling until the 1970s, when alternate models emerged through the entrance into the field of young performers with backgrounds in mime, folk music, theatre, clown arts, and a variety of ethnic oral traditions.

The hierarchy of media embodied in the library ritual is clear. The covered table functions as altar; at its ceremonial center

stands the book. The performer sits off to the side, deferential to the sacred arrangement of books and cut flowers in a crystal dish, an iconographic echo of the theme of nature (orality) sacrificed and sublimated to culture (literature). Ong writes in *Orality and Literacy* of how the custom of pressing flowers between the pages of books reinforces the connection of printing with death – the living word is likewise pressed between the pages of books to be sacrificed into the memorial realm of print. The storytelling revival of the 1970s once again brought storytelling out of the memorial vaults of libraries into the messy streets and byways of the living cultural moment. And thirty-five years on it is likewise engaged in a process of ceremonializing and memorializing what was then revived. Ceremony, ritual, and memorial are part of the infrastructure of cultural equilibrium – ritual enforces repetition which ensures continuity. When ritual repetition becomes mechanical or breaks down, stresses accumulate in the system, which leads to the process of revival or revitalization, and to new equilibrium—the cycle of cultural change and renewal.*

So, the earlier (1890-1920) American storytelling revival occurred at a complex moment of middle-class and elite saturation with the values of print and a simultaneous perception of those values under threat: an influx of oral/non-literate immigrants into the major urban centers, peoples whose presence evoked cultural anxiety and an outcry for remedial cultural activism. Yet even as that movement unfolded in its self-conscious restorative programs,

* This cultural subtext of technological initiation through the printed word was also enacted in Christian churches throughout the period of print, extending from Gutenberg's invention of movable type, which led inexorably to the Reformation, the creation of the "Authorized text" of the King James Bible at the beginning of England's imperial period, and the pervasive ongoing fundamentalist sacralization of the printed text. It is still a battle being fought and refought, even as the sacred text has been widely displaced or reframed by gigantic television monitors and miniature digital screens.

the technological ground under-girding the movement shifted out from under its original impulses. That thirty year period saw the rise of motion pictures as an insurgent cultural influence – driven by energetic entrepreneurs from among the outsider immigrant groups. It also saw the spread of radio, phonograph recordings, telephone communication, and the entire primary infrastructure of electronic media – what MacLuhan and Ong at a much further advanced stage of media self-consciousness would call the world of secondary orality.

Thus by the time that early storytelling revival reached its own institutional maturity, the wider cultural matrix had entered into a period of fervent and voracious internalization of the new media complex. American culture underwent a reverse oscillation from absorption in an idealized oral past to fascination with an unfolding technological future. This, I would suggest, in concert with specific political, social, and economic developments (the legal restriction of immigration in the 1920s, the economic boom of the 1920s followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, the rise of labor, socialist and New Deal politics, the coming of a second world war, etc.) was responsible for putting that particular American storytelling revival back to sleep for fifty years.

Similarly, in the 1970s when American youth had reached a point of weariness and disenchantment with the technological configurations that dominated their cultural landscapes, a critical subculture emerged that transfused itself with the alternative values and visions of oral traditional revivalism. Even as that movement matured, as it has at the present time with its fragile yet plainly visible structures of organizational forms and networks of practitioners and supporters, the technological ground has once again shifted beneath us. Our thirty-five years of storytelling revivalism has seen the rise of the personal computer, that summary aggregation of all previous electronic mediating functions into one exponentially powerful and pervasive cultural presence.

The computer gathers into its compact frame each phase of electronic communication that has reshaped the cultural landscape before it, from the telegraph (texting) and telephone to newspapers, movies, radio, and television. It has even swallowed up the post office, leaving only perhaps the parcel service to non-digital adjuncts (though you must track the status of your parcel online). From its unassuming beginnings as a “word processor,” an electronic typewriter with memory features, the device has engorged itself like the very hungry cat of folkloric fame to incorporate print, graphics, music, audio and video. All social domains and processes have migrated to the world-wide web, including but not limited to corporate and small business advertising and branding, selling, shipping, tracking, and receiving, personal and sexual relations, political communication and organization, news gathering and dissemination, game playing and spectatorship, and artistic creation, exhibition, and marketing. It is precisely the digital universe’s omnivorous fluidity in mixing all these social processes and sensory channels that has made it so swiftly and utterly culturally dominant and socially transformational.

Digital media provide a democratic cultural matrix in ways that its predecessor media could not and never attempted to match. Armed only with cheap digital audio and video recording devices attached to their PCs, an international brotherhood and sisterhood of isolated geek youth can chat, hook up, clown around, and broadcast their self-instructed self-expressions to potential audiences of millions around the globe, completely bypassing arbiters and gatekeepers that have traditionally rationed out the products of previous cultural systems. The digital environment is politically volatile, having already fostered peaceful and not-so-peaceful multi-colored (iconographically-driven) revolutions across the globe. This process of rapid techno-cultural evolution is a massively compelling story, meta-story, and mega-story that fixes the attention of a generation marked from birth by its epic progress, and which divides the attention of earlier

generations of storytelling activists who may still be struggling to retell the old revival narrative amid the overwhelming hubbub of a new digital echo-system.

Bhutan comes to this global festival of transformation and re-storying both late and early. The Kingdom has long been protected by its splendid Himalayan isolation. It retains not just the outlines but much of the substance of an ordered medieval society, with the same disciplined ranks of manuscript-based sacred and political castes and oral traditional agrarian peasantry that would have existed in Europe in the late middle ages. The relations between these social levels is mediated here as it was in medieval Europe by an iconographic tradition of retelling the sacred tales in pictorial array on the walls and ceilings of temples, in devotional pieces on home altars, and in traveling memory containers such as the story-boxes of mendicant religious epic singers. Most parts of the country are still deeply oral traditional. Yet the few urban centers that serve as portals for global cultural forms, goods, and media to enter in, such as this rapidly expanding capitol, inevitably exert a powerful gravitational pull on the national consciousness.

Bhutan is a unique sort of laboratory of cultural /technological change, in that while a thin sliver of the cultural elite has been educated in Western traditions and technologies for a century or so, it is only in the past few decades that this educational exposure has gradually spread to include a broadly influential segment of the Bhutanese citizenry. In the past decade alone, Western mass cultural media have been introduced to the country in accelerating tides of potentially disorienting innovation. And these new forms are being introduced, not in distinct phases of innovation, adjustment, stabilization, and organized mourning for what has been sacrificed (as in revival movements), but, as it were, all at once, led by the ultimate aggregative and revolutionary technological platform, the web.

It is hardly time yet to talk of a “storytelling revival” here in Bhutan. It is time to talk of the organized effort of cultural conservation, now underway, and to seek out and closely examine the tools of preserving and perpetuating the best features of oral traditional cultures – not only as artifacts pressed like dead flowers between the pages of books, but as living and vital processes and practices which allow the riches of traditional wisdom to be breathed out and breathed in, here in the Kingdom, of course, for the upliftment of its people and the sustenance of its land – and also perhaps to be broadcast to the world, so that the deeper web – the web of all sentient beings – may be strengthened and served.

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