

The Quantum of Cowboy Bob

A Contribution by Mike Bonifer to the Quantum Storytelling Conference
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Premise: Play makes the quantum energies in a story knowable and transactional.

Background: My father, Robert Bonifer, 1924-2005, was a farmer and small businessman who, for most of his adult life, lived with his wife, Fern, and their six children, of whom I was the oldest, on a 189-acre farm located 5 miles southwest of Ireland, Indiana, in the southwestern part of the state. A mysterious series of events in World War II, about which he never spoke for the rest of his life, shaped my father's narrative. He would only refer to these events obliquely, but their impact on him and his family turned out to be profound. It is my contention that the committed nature and clear intention of my father's *play* revealed the quantum-ness of his narrative, and that play offers the means by which any individual, organization or community can tell quantum stories.

There are three lenses it is important to apply to this text:

One is that when I say “storyteller” what I mean is a person or group who brings stories to life through improvisation, not by the narrower definition of a person or group who tells authorized stories to an audience. Telling, in this definition, is closer in meaning to revealing/generating/evoking than it is to authoring/narrating/performing.

Two is that for purposes of this presentation, the words “story” and “narrative” are used interchangeably. There are different definitions of and distinctions between these words floating around in the Academy. For this presentation, please set that argument aside, and read them as synonyms.

Three is that this is a commercial exercise with academic aspirations, not an academic paper with commercial ambitions. My primary objective in writing this is to underscore the economic and cultural vitality of quantum storytelling. I see this presentation as a series of suggestions for why and, to a lesser extent, how, quantum storytelling generates business opportunities, engages different audiences, and maintains relevance over time—considerations for any organization or community looking to create jobs and build economic sustainability.

Thumbs up, heels down, chin up, sit up straight, squeeze with the knees, here we go.

I. The Aroma of Horses

Robert Lee Bonifer was born in Sts. Mary and Elizabeth Hospital, in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 6, 1924. When asked about his lifelong love of horses, my father would say that “On the way home from the hospital after I was born, we drove past [the horse racing track] Churchill Downs, and I caught the aroma of horses, and I’ve loved horses ever since.”¹ It is a romantic notion. And there is consensus within the Bonifer family that Bob and his father would visit Churchill Downs when Bob was a boy. I never heard anyone question his story, but I used to be skeptical that he, being only days old, could have known it happened. Maybe it’s a story one of his parents told him. He never said. Today, it seems to me that whether it happened is not, or how the story came about, is not nearly as relevant as the idea that it is entirely possible that it happened. And, furthermore, whether he caught the aroma on the way home from the hospital, or how the story came about, is small potatoes compared to what I think today my father was saying: To be alive is to smell the horses. And: You can smell a story.

Let’s smell the horses.

Anyone who has been around horses for any length of time, especially during his or her early years, and has had a good experience with them, will tell you that the smell of a horse barn—the odors of marvelous large mammals and the environment in which one tends to those mammals, the hay, the tack, the sweet smelling feeds and pungent manures—is one you never forget. It is thoroughly evocative. “Aroma” in my father’s story evokes a sense of place, and of the denizens of that place. It connects the story’s “past-ness” to its present-ness. After all, we had horses. I knew what horses smelled like. We were in a horse barn, sitting five feet from a horse the last time he repeated the story.¹ “Smell that?” he was saying with his origin story, “that’s what I smelled when I was a baby.” And in the saying, and more importantly, the smelling, everything that had happened in a lifetime collapsed into a single experience. A baby caught a whiff of a horse. The rest is history. There is an important difference between a memory of sensing and a sensing of memory. I believe that what my father experienced was the latter. Smell that? That’s not only what horses smell like? That’s what the experience of remembering is like, and the purpose it serves.

A sense of memory (my memory is from the day I was born) is every bit as important, if not more, to quantum storytellers as the memory of a sense (what I remember is the smell of horses). Why? As Dr. David Boje explains, in his landmark text, *The Quantum Physics of Storytelling*: “Narrative repackages history by repressing memory, revising the living story by emptying out its content, replacing it with concepts, generalities and abstractions. They [businesses] can choose to transgress these narrative limits imposed by narrative ‘strategies of remembrance.’”² The aroma of horses liberates memory, it is very specific, and real. It is a way of remembering.

My father’s claim of getting stamped at birth with the aroma of horses didn’t go anywhere. It was not the opening statement in a monologue, a beat in a longer story, or the set-up to a punchline. He was not known for any particular marked-at-birth quality the way

one might think of a person who had, let's say, been in a car accident on the way home from the hospital as a baby and as a consequence always felt uneasy in cars. His life was not a series of colorful self-explaining coincidences like this one. He was not, in the linear sense, a teller of tales. Nor was he given to exaggeration. Optimism? Always. Extravagant dreaming? For sure. Exaggeration? Not that I can recall. His dreams may have been extravagant, but his reality was real. He never claimed to have had extraordinary experiences—ones he wanted to talk about, anyway. Rather, his tendency was to turn ordinary experiences—a sunset, a day of hard work, a horseback ride, a bonfire, a cold beer, a family sing-along—into something extraordinary. Not hugely extraordinary, with fireworks and balloons and crowds and such. Extraordinary in the sense that he would call attention to things that might otherwise be taken for granted. Like the day he came home from the hospital.

Whether he actually “caught the aroma of horses” on the way home from the hospital, no one will ever know. What I can tell you is that when he was around horses, my father was transformed. He inhaled more deeply, his breathing became audible, like what the yogis call *ujjayi*, or ocean breath. He was never more in his element than when around horses. They seemed to complete him. Observing this, there was never any reason for me to question his sense of memory. It was exquisite, and present. Who could question anything that was right in front of you like that?

The statement about the horse aroma was, I felt, a way for us to make sense of him, and maybe just as much, to for him make sense of himself. “Why am I so crazy about horses? I must've caught a whiff of them at Churchill Downs when I was a baby.” For a long time, it made as much sense as anything else a person might have said about my father's love of horses. Did it matter to anyone if he actually retained a memory from when he was two days old, or how he pieced that coincidence together? Did it matter if the route they took from the hospital to their house actually passed by Churchill Downs? To a historian, or a neuroscientist, it might matter. To a story generator like my father, it did not. The truth, the essential piece, of his saga was not contained in the data about birthdates and geography and road maps. It was contained in the act of smelling horses. It was not a fact as much as it was an exhortation, a call to action: Wake up and smell the horses!

Our sensing of memory and our memory of sensing are both in play.

Boje, a master blacksmith, describes how the senses can transport us into the future or trap us in retrospection, when he writes about the art of blacksmithing: “Take in the sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and notice the sights: the gestures, the colors, styles, and textures. Notice your emotions and your willful attention, as it oscillates and resonates in the Situation. If you are bored, expectant, angry, joyful, then why is that? And what has that emotion-volution to do with the Situation future that is ahead-of-itself, and in Now-ness that is not retrospective sensemaking?”²

II. Play at a High Level

It is not my intention to focus on my father's life as a quantum story, per se, because I believe that every life, every community, every field of clover, holds within it the properties of quantum-ness. What I mean to focus on with my father's story is the quality of the play that made the quantum-ness of his story knowable, and which yielded its unique and productive outcomes.

The high caliber of my father's play is something I am only just now beginning to understand, 59 years after I came into the world myself, and seven years after his death. His focus, his commitment, and his consistent exploration of themes, were all extremely refined on a conceptual level, and exceptional in terms of performance. The level of his play, and not anything super unique or "novelistic" about his personal story, defined him as a human being.

I present my observations about my father's level of play to support the idea that play unleashes the quantum effects of story. And, further, that these quantum effects have economic and cultural value.

In her book, *From Workspace to Playspace*, Dr. Pamela Meyer writes: "Organization, innovation, learning and change...thrive when there is room for whole person engagement. When we create playspace for intrinsic motivation and engagement, these business outcomes follow: decreased turnover; increased job satisfaction; improved net income and earnings per share."³

Meyer describes a connection between play and productivity. I agree that there is one. The connection, however, is indirect. For play to be economically effective, it must become knowable as story. The connection between play and productivity cannot be made without considering the connection between play and story. This is because storytelling, i.e. "the creation of cultural artifacts,"[#] is a powerful way of fueling and organizing networks. In *Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler writes: "...just as learning how to read music and play a musical instrument can make one a better-informed listener, so to a ubiquitous practice of making cultural artifacts of all forms enables individuals in society to be better readers, listeners, and viewers of professionally produced culture, as well as contributors of our own statements into this mix of collective culture."⁴ Culture is storytelling. Networked cultures like those described by Benkler require a new physics of storytelling.

III. On Timing and Timelessness

Stashed in my parents' bedroom closet when I was growing up, along with other family albums, boxes of photos and postcards, and my father's memorabilia from World War II: three photo albums filled with photos of movie stars of the 1930s and '40s. He had collected the photos growing up in Louisville, before his family moved to southern Indiana after my grandfather lost his job as a Cadillac mechanic during the Great Depression. Two of the albums contained excellent black-and-white, studio-produced photos of movie stars of the era,

many autographed personally “To Bob.” These were stars from Hollywood’s “Golden Era”—actors such as Gary Cooper, Robert Taylor, William Powell, Myrna Loy, Veronica Lake and Barbara Stanwyck. The third album in the set was reserved for photos, also black and white, also excellent quality, of famous movie cowboys, the occasional cowgirl, and the movie cowboys’ sidekicks: Roy Rogers, Tom Mix, Gene Autry, Dale Evans, Smiley Burnette, Slim Pickens, and the like. Many of these photos were also autographed personally “To Bob.” For me, a youngster of 6 or 7 when I first discovered them, the albums were a fascinating lens through which to look at a past that included these exotic, colorful characters—and my father as a boy.

There was one particular photo in the cowboy photo album that held my attention more than the others, the one I stared at and tried to figure out probably more than all the other photos combined. It was my father, who looked to be 16 or 17 years old at the time, dressed like a movie cowboy. Cowboy Bob had his own page in the movie cowboy album, just like Tom Mix and Gene Autry did.



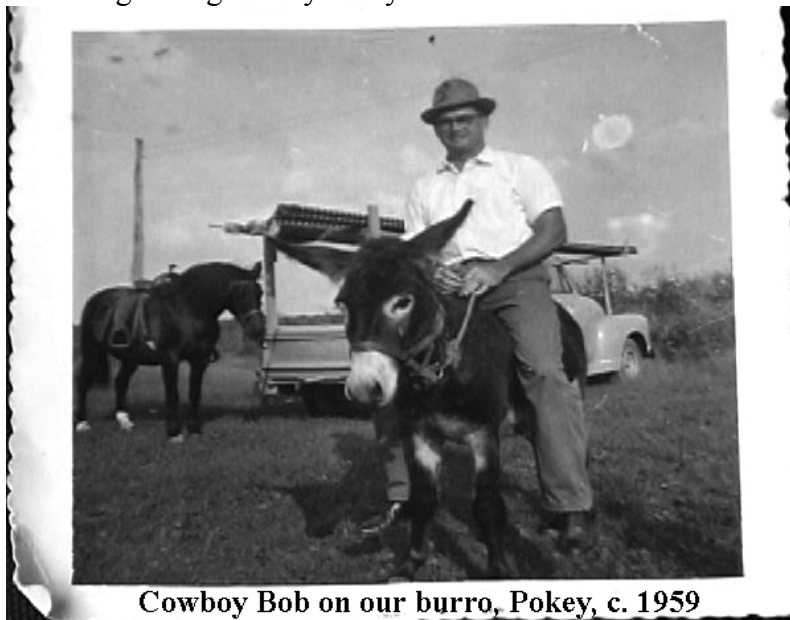
My father as Cowboy Bob, from his movie cowboy photo album

Like other chapters of my father’s life, there was a puzzling quality to these albums. They contained mysteries it would take me years to unravel, because, as I noted before, he was not a great explainer of the past, and he certainly didn’t dwell there. One of the mysteries of the photo albums is what movies these actors had appeared in that had prompted my father’s fandom. In 1960, around the time I discovered the albums, our family owned a small Philco black-and-white television that received one VHF channel clearly, if the weather was cooperative. Other than that, it was a box full of static. The classic films of the 1930s and 1940s were not accessible to us. It would take all of 30 years before I had sufficient context to understand the allure of Veronica Lake in *Sullivan’s Travels*, the quiet heroism of Gary Cooper in *The Westerner*, or why anyone would be a fan of James Stewart. It was a long time after viewing the photo of Gene Autry with his horse, Champion, and his guitar, that I came to understand the motif of the singing cowboy that tied all that iconography together. At the

time it just seemed...strangely familiar. There was a mystery, too, about why the photo of my father in his cowboy gear was mounted in the album with the cowboy movie stars, though I figured that one out soon, when I began imitating the basketball heroes of my own upbringing.

The biggest mystery hinted at in those albums was related to the photo of my father when he was a young man, dressed like a cowboy: *Why was he still pretending to be a cowboy?*

From the time of my birth, on December 31, 1953, elements of the cowboy narrative were still very much alive for my father and my family. I understood this from the get-go. My father was the same Cowboy Bob from the photo album. He wore a cowboy hat while working on the farm. We owned three horses, Spotty, Stony and Sara Lou, and a burro named Pokey. We sang around campfires and in the car. When we were of school age, my parents let my brothers, sisters and me order new cowboy boots and cowboy hats every year from the Tony Lama catalog, and wear them to school. We were the only children in the realm of my existence at that time who wore cowboy hats or boots. I felt alternately odd and proud about that, early evidence of a growing duality in my life.



Cowboy Bob on our burro, Pokey, c. 1959

Cowboy Bob would talk a lot about striking it rich, like in the movies. He had big plans for his farm. He just knew, for instance, that we had oil under our land, and it was only a matter of time before we drilled down and hit liquid gold. We were going to build a big Colonial style house for my mom. One day we'd own thoroughbred racehorses that would win the Kentucky Derby. He dreamed of opening our farm to the public, to have it be a place where people could come and ride horses. "Because people don't have that opportunity any more," he'd say. He would go on to describe his vision for our farm as "an outdoor recreation destination." And then further maintain that "outdoor recreation is the business of the future." It all seemed very movie-like. This was, after all, the very same Cowboy Bob from the album

of famous movie cowboys, so why would life not be like a movie? This is more me looking back in time than it is a realization I had when it was happening, but that makes it no less true: It was as if there was a story my father was trying to bring to life, for which no one in his supporting cast had a script.

He loved horses. Wow, did he love horses. He would be driving down a country road in the family station wagon, or in his pick-up, and come upon a horse in a field, and he would just stop the vehicle and look, mesmerized, the way a sailor who's been a long time at sea might stare at land. "I wonder whose horse that is," he'd say aloud, to himself. Sometimes he would stop at the nearest farmhouse, or interrupt a farmer working in a field on a tractor, to inquire as to the horse's lineage or ownership.

In the photo albums, and in a cowboy character my father began creating when he was a young man, we can see the playfulness that I believe is a hallmark of quantum storytelling. This playfulness establishes the conditions and does the work of bringing quantum stories to life.

Play generates dense narratives. By dense, I mean lots of story elements, packed with meaning. The likelihood of quantum-ness is related to density. It's the unpacking (or packaging) of, and making sense of, the density that yields the quantum energy and economic benefits.

The narrative density of my father's movie photo albums is one of their traits. Almost every page in each album was deep in cosmetic, emotional and meta meaning. They encoded lots of information. Held lots of (his)story and (her)story. Compared to a normal family photo album filled with repetitious shots and what Boje calls "cyclical antenarratives,"³ these albums were rich "assemblage antenarratives"³ that could and would be mined for decades.

Play creates quantum connections. The connections made by the albums, like the aroma of horses, are not simply linear. They are assemblages. Organic. Dependent on environment. Rooted in many places. Capricious. One word that describes all of it is playful. There was a lot of play in my father's curation of the albums. Westerns connected with other movie genres via Gary Cooper, Barbara Stanwyck and James Stewart, who were represented in both the cowboy and non-cowboy albums. Obviously, my father had experienced the movies in which these actors had starred. Those experiences, recalled, could connect the past to the present. The albums themselves connected their observer, via memory, curiosity or awareness, to the narratives encoded in them. Finally, and most important, by including his cowboy photo in the movie cowboy album, my father hitched his personal story to the great tide of the American Western genre, with all the movies and stories in every medium, that honored the role of the American cowboy. In mythic lore, these are men with heroic horses and pretty women by their side, who stand abide by a code of courtesy and fair play, who show strength in their deliberate silences and steady gazes, who ride to the rescue of the trapped, defend the defenseless, and protect the community from malefactors and skunks of all stripes. And all I had to do was walk outside our house to connect those movie narratives into the present was walk outside and interact with our horses Cowboy Bob. I did not know

how, but at an early age, I understood that those horses and the man in the cowboy hat connected us to our future, too.

Timing and timelessness. There is *timing* associated with any story—it matters where things go in sequence, when events occur relative to other events. In quantum stories, this time-based linear sequencing co-exists compatibly with the idea that in the act of play, the time is always, and only, now. Productive play happens in the moment, the act of creation “unfolding, unfurling, evolving” with each breath, each blink of an eye or blow of a hammer, with each word uttered or move made. “When you make tea, are you making tea? Or are you on your way to something else?” goes the old Chinese saying, quoted by the improvisation director, David Razowsky to his students.⁵ The answer, for tea makers, improvisers, blacksmiths and cowboys alike, is that action reveals something else, so you don’t have to be on your way anywhere. Be present, and responsive to your environment, and something useful will be revealed.

The timing (of events) and the timelessness (of stories) are both evident in my father’s photo albums. The albums are cultural artifacts produced by his play. They are also proofs of Cowboy Bob’s “timespacemattering” [Boje].² *How it was/How it is/How it will be* are all encoded in the albums, and serendipity is ever-present in the mix of the storytelling and the physical materiality of the albums.

On Timing: Each photo had a specific set of timings associated with it, like gears in a watch that clicked with each observer’s experience. All photos happened in the past. The pages opened in sequence. Click. Click. Click. The actors were certain ages when the photos were taken. Click. They were at certain points in the chronology of their careers. Click. The photos were taken on specific dates in the 1930s and ‘40s. Click. The actors’ filmographies and other data can be charted, traced and pinpointed in time. Click. This gives the albums and their content a quality that Boje calls *datability*.² Dates help establish authenticity, and improve our ability to monetize a narrative. They help concretize, for purposes of transactions, the value behind a story’s presence in a network, and compensation for the individuals involved in its telling. If, for example, I were a collector of movie memorabilia, the *datability* of the albums would be important to me in establishing their value in the marketplace.

On Timelessness: As props in a scene consisting of me and my brother, Mark, sitting in my parents’ closet and looking at the mysterious photos of the exotic people, the albums were timeless. They drew all of history and future into a completely liquid experience, a flow of infinite possibilities in the present. In this sense, the albums stretched time, made it so fluid that it ceased to matter. Time was water and Mark and I were fish.

Another way to put it is that upon viewing the albums, I became “unstuck in time,” a quality Kurt Vonnegut describes via his main character, Billy Pilgrim, in his novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*. In experiencing these albums, I am transported back and forth through time’s weave. To the movies and movie stars of my father’s youth, to the theaters where he sat, and to Churchill Downs and the aroma of horses. I can access the sensations of holding

the album in my hands, touching, smelling and seeing it. I can hear whinny of a live horse just outside our house. The experience extended into the future, into what these photos would mean to the next conversation I had with my father or mother. This experience would be with us the next time my brother and I put on our cowboy hats. All of that was simultaneously in play in the fierce flow of narrative represented by those albums. All things became infinitely mutable and completely accessible in the moment. One thing's for sure: I was not just sitting in a closet with my brother looking at photos taken in the 1930s and '40s. I was sitting in a closet and traveling through time.

I believe the uniqueness, and therefore the economic value, of the Cowboy Bob story, or of any quantum narrative, rests partly in the idiosyncratic relationship between their timing and their timelessness. Between their datability and their durability. Between their fixedness and their unstuckness. Between plot and myth. Between the closet and the outside world. And ultimately, between the earthbound and the ethereal.

It is my contention, supported by the work of Boje², Benkler⁴, Spolin⁶, Kuhn⁷, et al that: 1) timing and timelessness both characterize quantum stories; 2) game structure helps us define the relationship between these two traits; 3) an understanding of #s 1 and 2 are essential for individuals, communities and organizations to tap the quantum energy of stories in order to grow and prosper.

Boje writes about the importance to business of quantum storytelling, and understanding the antenarrative types: "If all the connections come from Past to Future, then retrospective sensemaking rolls over into projective sensemaking antenarratives that are linear and cyclical. That is OK, if the environment is the same as it always was, and there are no new technologies, the customer base is the same, the customer tastes are the same, and competitors are keeping to themselves. But if the environment changes, becomes more distributed, or clusters, or turbulent, then there is a need to get unstuck-from-the-past. In that situation, different sort of past LWMs [Little Wow Moments] need to be prospected, and uncovered."²

There is one other way that time and timelessness played out for me on our family's farm in southern Indiana. Of our 189 acres, 40 of them were in Pike County, and 149 acres in Dubois County. When I was growing up (this is no longer true in 2012), the county line was also the time zone line. In the winter, Dubois County would move into Daylight Savings time along with the Eastern Time Zone of the U.S., but Pike County, to the west, would remain in the Central Time Zone. When this happened, I could literally step back and forth between two time zones by stepping across a fencerow on our farm. This is a good allegory for the relationship I'm talking about: The datability was tied to the land on either side of the fencerow. This side of the fence: 5 PM. The other side of the fence: 6 PM. The unstuckness was the act of jumping back and forth between the two. The unstuckness was the quality of the light at whatever time of day I was doing the jumping. The unstuckness was my experience of playing.

III. Desevering the Sky

As our family grew, so did our family of horses, until, by the time I was 12 years old, the horses (10) out-numbered the humans (8). The six horses who joined our original herd of four were a motley equine crew, a mix of the good, the bad and the ugly—often all in the same animal. I never saw any evidence, nor did I hear any discussion, of the transactions that brought these horses to our farm. I always had the sense that whatever the transactions were, they were tied to the many times I'd seen my father “talk to a man about a horse,” one he'd just seen in a field as he was driving past, or one that belonged to a farmer with whom he was doing business.

I should explain here that the game my father played was bigger than the role of Cowboy Bob, and the environment was bigger than the 189 acres of our farm. Our family's income came primarily from a series of jobs my father held off the farm. Most of these jobs involved selling agribusiness products in the southern Indiana/northern Kentucky area. These products—which included feed grinders called Mix Mills, grain bins, and feed supplements—were designed to help small farmers become more self-sufficient, better able to time their interactions with the marketplace, and better able to manage costs of feed processing and storage. They provided alternatives to the farm collectives (e.g. Farm Bureau Co-Op) and large feed mills sponsored by, for example, Ralston Purina.

My father would often bring my brothers and me with him on his business calls with farmers, and on many occasions during these journeys off the farm we observed him following up on his fascination with horses, to the point of getting completely sidetracked by them. I began to observe that my father would use his connections to horses and their owners to stir up conversations tied to business. I also began to notice that the business with the farmers was not his focus. Horses were his focus. He conducted his business off the farm to get at, buy, trade for, and rehabilitate the horses he came across—not the other way around. The business with the farmers was an outcome of the game, but it was not the game or its objective. Other outcomes of his game would become clearer over time. There was never any doubt that objective of the game was to collect more of those damned horses.

They were damned because if it weren't for my father, many of them would've been sent to the Ralston Purina dog food factory, they were that defective. There was Old Gray, who had one lung, and would rasp like a saw going through wood when she ran. There was Snips, who had a biting and all-around temperament problem, whose name Cowboy Bob changed to Snips, “because his previous owner mistreated him, and we don't want to call him by his old name, he hears it again, he might snap.” There was Mac, a muscular Tennessee Walker stallion who was so lusty that the barn took a serious beating when he showed off for a mare in heat. We had the Odd Couple of horses who became best buddies, Tony, a large, big-boned half-Morgan, half-quarter horse; and Duke a small half-pony, half Tennessee Walker, who was such a fast walker while being ridden, that a rider would have to walk him in circles in circles in circles in circles in circles...to allow the slow-ambuling Tony.....to catch up.

And then: my father made these misfit horses the center of a new business for our farm. My parents had previously done some halfhearted (by comparison to this new venture) dairy farming. The new venture was a riding stable, where people could pay to ride our horses on a bridle path my father had cut through our fields—not through the woods. Cowboy Bob would explain to prospective riders why the bridle path was out in the open like that: to prospective riders: “That way the riders waiting to ride can watch the riders riding. When people come out, they want to see people riding, they don’t want them going into the woods, where they can’t see them.”

The riding stable changed all way of life. For one thing, our farm was now open to the public. Our hours of operation were vague, as customers heard about us primarily through word of mouth, with incomplete information. We would have people showing up at all hours of the day throughout the summer months to ride horses, and calling our home phone number randomly to see if we were open. Cars and trucks would drive past our farm slowly without stopping. This was not a steady stream of customers and calls but an intermittent one, which made the intrusions all the more annoying. There was no schedule. Just when it seemed we would not be saddling horses for the day, or that we could unsaddle them at the end of a day, a couple of cars would appear, with people who wanted to ride. Sometimes these people would be drunk. One of my brothers or I was usually drafted to ride the lead horse for these group. Often, on weekdays, my father would be away from the farm on business, and it would be up to my mother, who had to battle her lifelong fear of horses, and the three oldest boys in the family, to manage the business in his absence.

When a group of drunk mechanics showed up late on a Friday afternoon, and took the horses for a joyride, leaving the horses gasping, foaming, exhausted and my mother in tears...when the kids at school began making fun of me and bad-mouthing the “free horseback rides” I gave away in the class Christmas gift exchange (“I wanted a *manicure kit!*” moaned the girl whose name I’d drawn)...when a girl fell from a horse onto her head and had a concussion, and I watched the color drain from my father’s face when the girl’s father threatened to sue to have the riding stable shut down...when these events and others like them piled up the impressions...I began to sense that this riding stable thing was not going to work.



I understood that what my father was doing was the right thing for him. I was not capable of knowing him any other way, than as Cowboy Bob, who loved horses. All horses. Even the bad ones. I knew that there was something heroic and wonderful about this. I couldn't articulate it, but I could feel it.

At the same time, I saw that his dreams of building this ragtag riding stable operation into some kind of outdoor recreation mecca were going to be a big bust. Our horses were defective. Our tack was second rate. Our marketing efforts dismal. But while my mother and I, and others around us, seemed to know this, my father did not seem to notice or, if he did, he didn't care.

The eye-rolling and cutting remarks about our misfit horses, and about my father's quixotic stubbornness in the face of all this could keep me awake at night, pondering the duality.

How could my father be a cowboy hero, and at the same time such a failure? The question made my heart ache. When wrestling with it, I sometimes felt as if I was going to cry. Other times it would make me angry, frustrated, or embarrassed.

I spent a lot of time when I was a boy pondering the Hero / Fool duality. My favorite contemplation spot on our farm was sitting alone in the branches of a maple tree that my brothers and sisters and I would climb for fun. It was part of a cluster of maples near our house that we called The Shade Trees. What I liked about sitting in the tree to think was that I could see out, but no one could see in, people would not immediately notice me sitting in the tree. Sitting inside that maple tree, ten or fifteen feet in the air, looking out through its canopy of leaves, was like having a one-way mirror on the world!

I was sitting in this maple tree one day when I was 11 or 12 years old, looking out at the half-dozen horses in our riding stable. They were saddled with tack as eccentric as the horses themselves—rodeo saddles, Australian saddles, fine German made saddles, English saddles, and all types of bits and hackamores—tethered to a hitching post, waiting for the capricious riding public to show up—or not. Suddenly, an idea came to me. I got very excited about this idea. It stirred me. Today, when I clear my mind, I can return to that day, and evoke the feeling I had then. It's still there. It does not come to me as it first did, as the joyous thrust of a seedling piercing the soil, as The Greatest Idea the World Has Ever Known, but the idea still resonates, strong and true. My decision to become a professional writer is rooted in the day I got this idea.

The idea that came to me while I was sitting in the tree was this: I would tell my father's story. Yes! *I would tell the story of Cowboy Bob!*

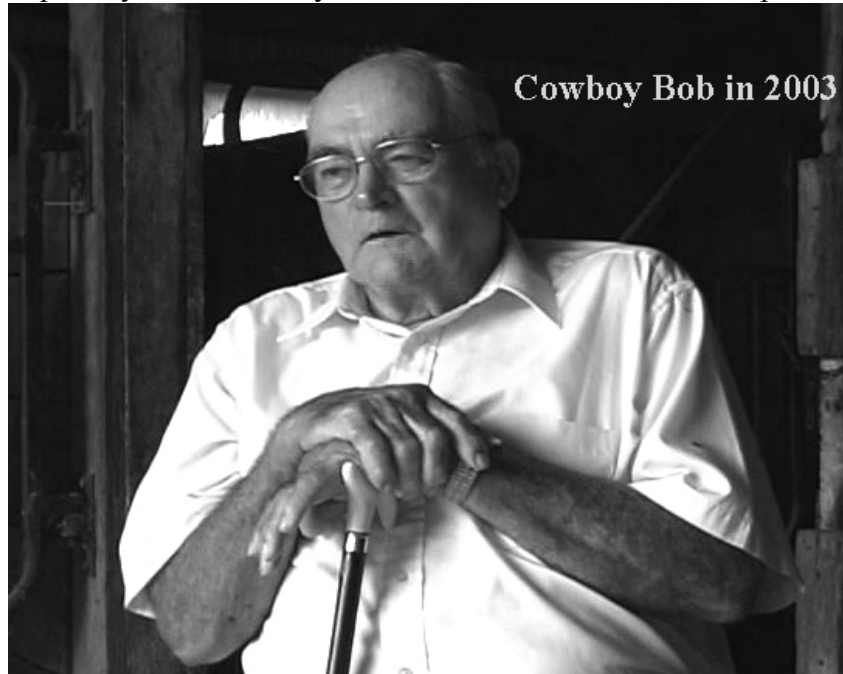
Simply the *decision to tell the story* eased my heart's torment. This, then, would be my work. My way of helping my family. I would share the character of Cowboy Bob, and his vision of turning our farm into an outdoor recreation destination, and the masses would read of it and the masses would find us! By sharing his story, I could give Cowboy Bob the stage he deserved. By telling it I would make him a star worthy of inclusion in the album of famous movie cowboys. Clearly, this is what he wanted. Then he would have it. As the star of a cowboy movie is how he saw himself. Then that is how the world would see him, too.

It would all come about, the duality of Hero and Fool would be resolved, because I would tell his story. Even now, as I write this line, my heart smiles.

When I discovered Dr. David Boje's work on the quantum physics of storytelling, as dense and difficult as it was for me to comprehend at first, it seemed familiar to me, as if I was reading about something I'd already learned, or re-visiting a place I'd been to before. Richard Taylor, a movie visual effects supervisor and director, says of this phenomenon in art, "It will remind you of something you've never seen before." As much as anything about Boje's work, I recognized the idea that quantum storytelling resolves duality. Boje writes, "In quantum storytelling, there is no duality of storytelling and materiality."² And later: "Desevering an interpretation, an understanding that instead of duality of subject-Object, there is joining together into oneness. Desevering can be the use of technology in connecting a near to a far time or place."² These notions are entirely consistent with how the act of storytelling resolved the duality between what I knew about Cowboy Bob from a business standpoint (Fool), and what I felt about him from a human standpoint (Hero).

This resolving of dualities is a type of outcome of play I had recognized prior to encountering Boje's work, when I discovered improvisation for myself, around 2001. The ability of improvisational play to transcend cultural divides, subjectivity, ideologies and other illusory boundaries, also seemed familiar to me when I first encountered it. It was like hearing a language I knew as a child, had forgotten, and was hearing again many years later.

I have experienced the transformative outcomes of play many times, in my personal life and in my business life, and my father's story is a microcosm of all of it. One of the things I could begin resolving after that day sitting in the maple tree was the question of why my father was still pretending to be a Cowboy. I began to see that, in the words of the Broadway dancer, he did it for love. His love of horses transcended all the things that could divide people. The poor quality of our horses was, it turned out, a kind of proof of that love. His game was being steadfast about loving horses and trusting that this "heart of caring" would result in productive outcomes for him and his family. That was his game. As the author, Ray Bradbury, said to when I once asked him the secret to living a good life, "Name your loves and prove your loves." My father's love was horses and he spent his life proving it.



I myself did not love horses, or even like them very much. To me, they represented a lot of work. The more horses my father acquired—at one point we had nearly 40 horses on the farm—the more of a burden they were on our family economically and in terms of the attention they required. My skeptical view of horses was something I had in common with my mother, who was, and still is, nervous around them. Yet this nervousness never betrayed her, never diminished her resolve to support my father's dreams. Her focus was that she loved my father. This was her game, her heart of care. It is what she, my brothers and sisters and I had in common. As it turns out, we had it in common with a lot of other people too. We loved Cowboy Bob. My idea of telling of his story was rooted in that love.

Love what you do, and why you're doing it, and your path will make itself known to you. Be meaningful with your actions and your story will be revealed. Move on love, and your heart will find a way to smile.

Dualities are the contrails of linear storytelling. They sever the sky. In linear, or what I often call Newtonian narratives, choices are made for us or we are limited in terms of our

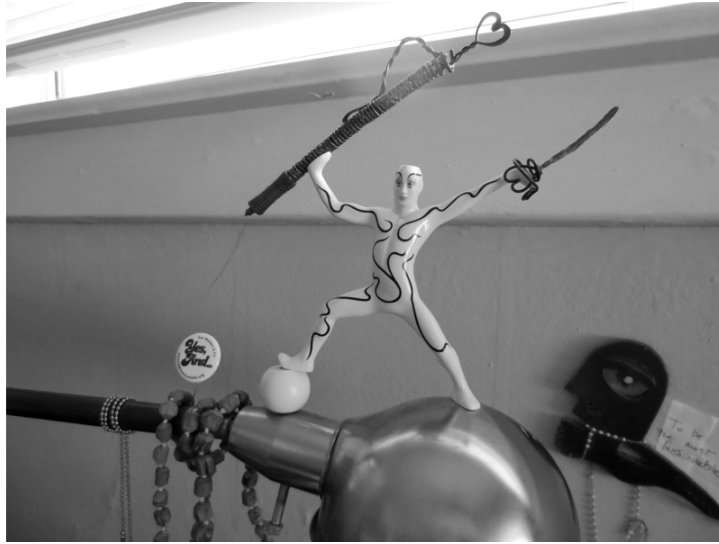
choices by the script and the “official” storyline. We are enervated by the battle for control of the dominant narrative. Are we going to believe my interpretation of history or yours? Should we follow his vision or hers? Believe in our god or theirs? In god or in no god at all? These severances are the heart’s torment. They breed indecision, discord and pain.

Their cyclical nature, and the frequency of their repetition, means that we mistake our familiarity with Newtonian narratives for our truths. As the Nobel-winning economist Daniel Kahneman suggests in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, “A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth. Authoritarian institutions and marketers have always known this fact.”⁸

Kahneman’s book, like Benkler’s and Boje’s work, and that of a lot of other academics and applied improvisers like myself,⁹ depicts a too-long history of organizational and cultural narratives designed for repetition and familiarity instead of extension, now-ness, and new-ness. These Newtonian models might have been sufficient for an Industrial economy, where channels were discreet and machines were slow, but for a Networked economy where channels intersect on a quantum scale and machines move at electron speed, these models are insufficient.

Because quantum stories cohere around themes,⁹ what Boje calls “the heart of care,”² and not around a singular point of view or a particular cause-and-effect relationship, they can resolve dualities by containing them. They are, in effect, “big enough.” They are both here and there. They are now, then, and when, simultaneously. Your version of history is true and so is mine. Our god, your god and no god co-exist compatibly in Heaven, Mecca, and on Krishna’s battlefield. We are not looking for common descriptions, but for common caring. From this common caring, new and unique descriptions will flow. In the process, we will “agree the dualities out of existence.” Or at least minimize their harmful effects enough to be productive and at peace.

A word of Boje’s that I have begun using to describe resolving dualities is “deseverance.” It is drawn from his 10 D’s (now 11) of Quantum Storytelling.¹⁰ Desevering makes instantaneous connections between near and far, across time and place. I read the word and the act in a broader context. As I look at the magnet man on my desk lamp holding one of Boje’s blacksmithed Heart of Care swords, forged for the purpose of desevering, I cannot help but feel that it has the power to desever more than just time and place, nearness and farness, past and present. It can de-sever your version of events and mine, to make our versions one. It can desever our differences to make us whole.



A Quili holding Boje's Heart of Care Pen and Desevering Sword

Play resolves duality. My conviction is that one of the primary benefits for any cohort to get involved in quantum storytelling is that engages them in the important process of resolving dualities. Quantum storytellers *are in the business* of resolving dualities. Of desevering the sky.

IV. Quantum Connections Cont'd

More updraft from the thermal that ultimately lifted me toward Boje's work and quantum storytelling: In November of 2009 I met Gary Schwartz at the Applied Improvisation Conference in Portland. When Schwartz was a teenager studying mime in Los Angeles in the 1960s, he enrolled in a class taught by Spolin in her Los Angeles children's theater. He later became her assistant, and eventually Spolin's work with Theater Games became the focus of his professional life. Today he is the owner and keeper of Spolin.com, archivist for a lot of her professional papers and correspondence, and a highly regarded theater teacher.

Near the end of our conversation Schwartz suggested that I read a book he said Viola Spolin really liked: *The Tao of Physics* by Frijtof Capra. "She thought it was one of the most important books she'd ever read," he told me. "She always said that if she hadn't taught improvisation she'd have been a physicist."

I was puzzled by this suggestion, and by the thought of Viola Spolin as a physicist. I was not familiar with the Capra book. And why would the woman I call "the improv

godmother” be interested in a book about the connections between quantum mechanics and Eastern spirituality?

I read *The Tao of Physics* early in 2010. I read it like I would read a mystery novel. The mystery was this: *Why would Viola Spolin think this book is important?*

In my slow reading of the book—these were not easy concepts for me—clues revealed themselves. Connections between quantum mechanics, Eastern spirituality *and* improvisation as conceived by Spolin, who “dreamed of a world of accessible intuition.”⁶ For example, Capra writes, “The idea of ‘participation instead of observation’ has been formulated in modern physics only recently but it is an idea which is well known to any student of mysticism.”¹¹ And to any student of improvisation. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin writes, “We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything. This is true for the infant moving from kicking to crawling to walking as it is for the scientist with equations.”⁶

Capra: “Like the quantum field, *ch’i* is conceived as a tenuous and non-perceptible form of matter which is present throughout space and can condense into solid material objects.”¹¹

Spolin: “As water supports and surrounds marine life, space substance surrounds and supports us. Objects made of space substance may be looked upon as thrusts/projections of the (invisible) inner self into the visible world, intuitively perceived/sensed as a manifest phenomenon, *real!*”⁶

In the margins of Capra’s book, I made notes about the connections between improvisation, Eastern mysticism and quantum mechanics. On February 4, 2010, I published a blog entry on my company’s website with the title *Quantum Narrative*.¹² It was my first attempt to connect improvisation with an entirely new (for me) way of thinking about story. A series of trackbacks, comments and follow-ups from this post led to Boje’s work, and to meeting and conversing with Dr. Boje, and meeting Grace Ann Rosile, their horses and several of their colleagues in Las Cruces in November of 2011. Dr. Boje reciprocated with a two-day visit to Los Angeles in January of 2012.

There are, of course, common refrains running through all of this work—through The Tao, Bell’s Theorem, Spolin’s accessible intuition, my family’s riding stable and the ringing echoes of Boje’s blacksmith hammer. One of the common refrains is that we are transformed by our acceptance of what’s happening Now. Daniel Kahneman calls it “WYSIATI.” “What You See Is All There Is.”⁸ Play is the art of accepting and responding to All There Is.

Another common refrain, one that Boje and I identified in the course of our conversations, is that *play serves as a kind of “activator” for quantum stories*. Boje writes: “Quantum storytelling is ‘those moments of vision’ in Being-in-the-world, in-time of one’s life path where spirit is grounded in ‘heart of care’ for the world’s environmental realms:

work, equipment, supplies, consumption, welfare, and their concern, care, or exploitation of Nature.”¹⁰

Spolin says: “The first step toward playing is feeling personal freedom. Before we can play (experience), we must be free to do so. It is necessary to become part of the world around us and make it real by touching it, seeing it, feeling it, tasting it, and smelling it—direct contact with the environment is what we seek.”⁶

These two statements, in my opinion, could not be more compatible.

V. Yes and And: Acceptance and Response

Play is predicated on two agreements. An agreement to play, and an agreement on a game. We put these agreements into play by *accepting and responding*. In improvisation, a fundamental way to accept and respond is with the technique known as “Yes anding.”

The technique of “Yes anding” is often introduced with players literally saying the words “Yes and” before every statement, and making declarative statements, not asking questions. Once players get a sense of the practice, they can quit being literal with the language, and simply operate in “the spirit of “Yes and.”⁹

The “Yes” is the agreement to the reality of the other player or the environment. The “and” builds on that reality it with an observation of our own. Out of this comes the new, transformed space, and with the transformed space, transformed players.

In play, our acceptance of the offering of the other is not passive. It is not resignation. Resignation is cyclical, as in when we are resigned to the idea that nothing will ever change. We are beaten down. Sapped of energy. By contrast, in play, our acceptance is active and appreciative. It comes about through our ability to share the focus of the activity or scene. Things are going to change because I am going to help change them.

Behaviorial scientist Farnaz Tabaei describes how improvisational play leads to productive outcomes for organizations: “The development of the storyline in improvisational play is analogous to the development of strategy in organizations (Crossan, 1998).¹³ In improvisation there are a number of tried and tested principles that allow the actors to play, within boundaries, and co-create a solid and coherent storyline. Actors are prepared to deviate from the plan and trust their intuitions if the scene requires it. The same principles of improvisational play when practiced by leaders can help create adaptive strategies that combine the intended strategy of the organization with the emergent and the unexpected to ensure organization’s competitive advantage in the marketplace.”¹⁴

Whether we belong to an organization, a community or a team of entertainers, the philosophical agreement in improvisation is that we are sharing space, and in that space we will discover our shared reality.

I accept your time zone and your location, and you accept mine. I am in one county. You are in another. I time-travel to be with you. We jump through time together while holding hands and put ourselves into two time zones simultaneously. If it's between midnight and one o'clock in the morning, you can stand on Saturday and I'll be standing on Sunday, and when we jump, we will be jumping back and forth across days. If we get married between midnight and one o'clock in the morning, while standing in different time zones, we will have a two-day wedding anniversary. If we stand on either side of the line at midnight on New Year's Eve, we'll be standing in different years. And if we jump at the same time, you from your time zone, me from mine, and in the middle of our jump, as our paths cross, our lips touch, and we kiss in mid-air, between the hours and the days and the years, our love will live forever.

Newtonian narratives tell us what time zone we're in. Quantum storytelling is the act of jumping across time.

To be continued...

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