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QUALITIES OF MOMENT

(A Storyteller's Language of Consciousness)

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by

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A two frame cartoon caught my eye a while ago, but you'll have to imagine it because I didn't cut it out. *Frame One:* Couple beside each other in bed and the man is saying: "How was it for you darling?" *Frame Two:* The woman looks puzzled as she says: "How was what?"

Well storytelling can be like that too. In a way. Get it wrong, be too glib or at the other extreme too self conscious, fail to connect with your audience, 'get through', 'engage' (all these metaphors we use), above all ignore the two way quality of the interaction and the whole tapestry of circumstance around it and nothing happens, not really. Your story is whisked away on the wind and no one remembers much about it. How was what?

But only get it right, really right well, I'd guess a lot of people here would have a fair idea of how very magical that can be in all sorts of ways. Which is extraordinary really because in more sober and 'objective' mood, with more 'scientific' hats on, we'd be obliged to say that the storytelling that 'didn't happen' did, just as the experience the woman can't recall presumably did

happen from a biological and sociological point of view. With biological and social consequences perhaps. "How was it for you?"

I want to suggest here today that it might not be possible to really understand some of the dynamics of oral storytelling, especially in what I'll call performance situations, without appreciating certain qualities of consciousness involved. I'd like to draw attention to some factors beyond words, techniques of non-verbal communication, plots, individual metaphors, patterns of speech, social contexts and all that might seem readily analysable. And I want to suggest that, as storytellers in this twenty-first century world, we need to develop an effective if not necessarily entirely precise and scientific language which will help storytelling to deliver its full potential in a time and a culture which one could almost say is set up to prevent it doing so.

That's a bit of a tall order in a short paper, so I hope you'll forgive my shortcomings. I'm a storyteller first, not a scholar and that's very much evidenced in what I want to do to begin with, which is to go on a little tour of a few traditional concepts. A good scholar would be very wary of doing that I'm sure, sensitive to the very different natures of differing cultures and the very different ways they construct their realities. But a storyteller can flail around wildly like the proverbial sorcerer's apprentice, mixing up this and that potion in a bubbling stew of wildly imaginative ideas. Which is one of our jobs maybe.

Anyway, first stop is probably familiar to many of you. It's the *craic*. (I should spell that out: C-R-A-I-C, in case anyone thinks I'm into hard drugs, though confusingly it's often spelled C-R-A-C-K for English audiences.) It's a word we use a lot in Britain on the storytelling scene and I imagine it's pretty well known here. It maybe means most to people with an Irish background, for many of whom it's an essential ingredient of good social gatherings. It's translated from the Irish Gaelic as *fun, having a good time, having a laugh*, but that just shows the limitations of translation. There's more to it when you hear it in use. Sure, people say about a music session or a party or whatever that "the craic was good"

and they might just mean that they had a good time and so did some other people they were with, because like a lot of traditional notions, the term is fuzzy round the edges. But I think there's a recognized suggestion when you talk about *good craic* that an event came to life, gelled, flowed. People were absorbed in the group mood, it all added up to more than the sum of its parts - something like that.

Now that's very interesting. For one thing, it suggests we can at least be aware of something beyond the foreground in events in which we're involved. Compare it, though, with a concept that's well known in parts of Indonesia. Kathy Foley writes in a study of Sundanese *Wayang Golek* (rod puppetry):

"The primary criterion that villagers use for judging a performance is whether or not it is *ramai*. When a performance is not *ramai*, people soon drift home to sleep. The word will pass that the *dalang* (puppeteer) was mediocre. The family that hired him will gain little status and he will probably not be invited to play in the area again. A *wayang* must first be entertaining."¹

For the *dalang*, *ramai* is something he needs to be aware of; you could almost call it a technical term for him. According to R.A. Sutton, it translates as "busy, noisy, congested, tangled - but in a positive sense."² For Indonesian taste, there has to be a lot going on - think of the designs of batik for example. The *wayang* typically goes on all night, telling stories from the Mahabarata or Ramayana mixed with local legend. People have to have the opportunity to be absorbed in the performance but also to drift, talk, buy satay and other snacks, smoke clove-scented kretek cigarettes, chat, all sorts of things. Then the performance itself has to vary as it goes along and the accompanying gamelan ensemble and singers have to take their cues from the puppeteer, helping to maintain the drama itself and the whole quality of group mood. Which all makes the event *ramai*.

At first sight, it seems a rather alien concept to modern westerners, used to the tightly focused and contained performance with the break for drinks and refreshments. But I think underneath, allowing for huge differences in culture and the fact that the *ramai* concept evidently has a wider range of applications, you might spot affinities with the mood some describe as *good craic*.

The Spanish word *duende* is pretty widely known. Certainly you can buy expensive perfume and other products with the name, so I assume the manufacturers did their research. The concept entered European art culture largely through the writings of the poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, particularly his influential 1933 lecture, "*Play and Theory of the Duende*". Christopher Maurer writes:

"The notion of *duende* (from *duen de casa* - "master of the house") came to him from popular Spanish culture, where the *duende* is a playful hobgoblin, a household spirit fond of hiding things, breaking plates, causing noises and making a general nuisance of himself. But Lorca was aware of another popular usage of the term. In Andalusia, people say of certain toreros and flamenco artists that they 'have *duende*' - an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability on rare occasions, to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening to them."³

In 'Deep Song', Lorca himself wrote:

"The *duende* is a momentary burst of inspiration, the blush of all that is truly alive, all that the performer is creating at a certain moment. It manifests itself principally among musicians and poets of the spoken word for it needs the trembling of the moment and then a long silence."⁴

Though Lorca generalised *duende* to include various categories of art, he didn't include storytelling, unsurprisingly given the time in which he was writing and the artistic culture he inhabited within that time, though you could say that

storytelling also needs the 'trembling of the moment'. We're looking at a rather different concept from *craic* and *ramai* here, one that's much more to do with the individual, the 'inspiration' she or he reaches for in the performing moment and his or her *charisma, presence, power*. Which are more words we sometimes use without thinking too hard about them.

Sheila Stewart, whose credentials as the 'last of the Stewarts of Blairgowrie' would seem to give her the right to speak pretty authoritatively about the Scottish Traveller traditions of storytelling and music, has been running workshops on the international storytelling scene around the notion of *Conyach* (spelled C-0-N-Y-A-C-H for those who think we're talking about another kind of spirit). In an article for the English Society for Storytelling's magazine, *Storylines*, Chuck Krueger describes how Sheila breaks down pretence and reservation in a session to get to this essential quality. "Anger's got bugger all to do with spirit," says Sheila in typically blunt fashion. "I love the spirit that much I could put it between two slices of bread. Bugger the voice, it's how you produce it." Krueger continues: "We at last understand why sometimes, even when we hear a super story, the teller has put us to sleep because there's no *Conyach*."⁵

Very tempting to compare *conyach* with *duende* as a personal quality of *presence, focus, flow*.

In many of the esoteric traditions of spirituality, stories and storytelling are important means on the way towards achieving what is often defined as 'higher consciousness'. Because the states of awareness cultivated in those traditions are unusual and because the orders or reality said to be perceived are held, rightly or wrongly, to be of a higher nature, many special words have been coined. Some of those words pass into the surrounding culture. For example, in Morocco, where dervish fraternities have flourished for centuries, the Sufi term *baraka*, which is commonly translated as *blessedness* or *divine grace* and is held to be a kind of independent spiritual force⁶, is widely used to mean luck. The *rawi qissas* (public reciter of narratives) in the Marrakesh market

place may well call down the *baraka* on you when you give him some coins for his tales without necessarily meaning any more than a traditional form of thankyou. Another term Sufis use is *kaif*, which according to Morag Murray is “the effect which a person, idea, event, object etc. has upon one... distinct from aesthetic pleasure or any familiarly labelled experience.” But, she says, “the very term *Kaif* has become cheapened, so that people use it to mean ‘This is something I like,’ or ‘I enjoy that’ or ‘He has presence,’ or ‘This is satisfying, attractive, stimulating.’ ” She points out that hashish smokers appropriated the term and mispronounced it as *keef*, one of the middle eastern slang terms that passed into the western counterculture.⁷

I mention those last two examples by way of a caveat. It's easy to take a traditional term and use it too glibly or superficially or with a halo of over-imaginative identification. These days you can do all sorts of weekend and summer course that offer all kinds of mysterious ‘forces’ and experiences , from opening up your *chakras* to correcting you *chi* energy and sorting out your relationship to *prana*. And I believe you can get a certificate and a tee shirt to prove you did it.

But to return to the first four qualities I described, I chose them to illustrate the existence, in many cultures where forms of storytelling and other live arts are well established, of some background concepts and structures which make sense of aspects of the experience of them, aspects which are associated in various ways with changes of consciousness. Aspects which have, as it were, technical implications for operators.

Now for a revival teller like me, there is plenty of appetite for stories but really little supporting infrastructure of commonly accepted ideas in the mainstream culture many of my listeners spend most of their time immersed in. Or rather there is but it is drawn from our literary and dramatic traditions on the one hand but (increasingly) from mechanical performance media of film, radio, TV etc., all of which you could say tend not to be really conscious *of* and *in* the moment. By

which I mean that, in all of those models, a work is still primarily (despite much experimental 'performance art') conceived and developed in one time and place and then performed in another. A film or a CD or a DVD doesn't respond to you, work with your mood and general circumstance, bring you closer to your neighbour; storytelling can do all of those things - unless it is trying to be a film or a CD in some way.

And that's why I think there's this need for contemporary storytellers to develop a modern language which is perhaps primarily about consciousness - because the idea that storytelling should be like, say, stage drama or a video is inclined to make it less than it could be. This language I'm thinking of could be as fuzzy around the edges as terms like *craic* or *ramai*, but with a central area of clarity in the same way. It needn't be too precise, but it also need not be inimical to what is known in science. Maybe it would debunk a few spurious mystifications and obfuscations too, at the same time as allowing the possibility of real mystery and new discovery.

There are at least three areas of consciousness involved in a social storytelling event:-

1. The consciousness of the teller of the story.
2. The consciousnesses of the individual members of her/his audience.
3. The consciousness of the group as a whole.

You could elaborate a lot of concepts around each of these. I'm going to try now briefly to set out a few suggestions.

First of all for the individual teller, three alliterative words, *focus*, *flow* and *flight*.

You hear this word *focus* quite a bit these days and it works as well as a metaphor. You *focus* a camera or a microscope or telescope to give you a clearer image, better sight, a closer view, to align the lenses etc. You *focus* rays

of the sun's light with a magnifying glass and make a fire. You *focus* thoughts and energies on a task. There's a suggestion of strengthening and concentrating something, in this case the individual storyteller's consciousness.

We are all sorts of things apart from storytellers and we need to find the bit of ourselves that knows the stories and how to tell them, find what seems to me at least a sharper, clearer awareness. I know hundreds of stories but sometimes I can't even recall one of them. In passing, I should say that this seems to square with some relatively recent views of the way human consciousness operates. For example, the psychologist, Robert Ornstein has provided models that explain why we are not the same "self" from moment to moment, a pattern in which a series of 'simpletons', small consciousnesses unaware of each other are 'wheeled in' in succession to occupy the foreground. ⁸ "Conscious development," he writes, " probably consists of attaining a genuine measure of understanding and control of the wheeling and dealing mental system."⁹

When you're in focus, you can 'flow' instead of merely recalling, reciting, regurgitating. And when you're in flow, it's almost as if the story seems to happen despite you. Peak performance as a phenomenon has been studied by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of the University of Chicago , who used the term 'flow' to describe a particular state of absorption evidently experienced by all kinds of people in different activities, from running to composing to cooking¹⁰ . Daniel Goleman, in his deservedly popular book "Emotional Intelligence", says:

"Flow is a state of self-forgetfulness, the opposite of rumination and worry: instead of being lost in nervous preoccupation, people in flow are so absorbed in the task at hand that they lose all self-consciousness, dropping the small preoccupations....of daily life. In this sense, moments of flow are egoless. Paradoxically, people in flow exhibit a masterly control of what they are doing...."¹¹

I use the term *flight* to describe something that can happen sometimes which is beyond personal absorption, however egoless. With some competence and a little bit of a following wind, you can achieve a measure of personal focus and hope to get into flow. But then sometimes there's a moment of 'lift off' when something extra happens and you suddenly find yourself discovering new things about a story you thought you knew so well - as if the 'chemistry' between you and the audience and the time and the circumstance had 'produced' something unexpected. I'll return to that one in a moment.

Now looking at the individual consciousnesses of audience members and how they relate to that of the storyteller and then to what you can arguably call the group consciousness, the first words that come up are around *doors* and *locks* and *keys*. These are things particularly necessary to consider in contemporary societies where education still stresses the development of critical faculties strongly and where the culture focuses very much on ego awareness. People generally come along to hear stories with a series of *doors* that are locked and you try to open as many of those doors as is feasible - they're self-conscious, distracted, excited, depressed, in their own separate worlds to a greater or lesser extent. And just because people, adults and children, are different and circumstances are different and time is different, you need a range of tricks up your sleeve to cope with that, break down resistances, jump over fences, unlock the locks and open the doors. That I think is the nature of real storytelling skill. It's also why it's possible to get the wrong idea watching a teller only for a few minutes early on in a session - rather like the farmer who, according to the English storyteller Taffy Thomas, trained donkeys extremely well using loving kindness. You see, a professor from some learned institution or other came to see him to study his methods, having heard of this extraordinary feat and knowing how stubborn and impossible donkeys can be. Well, the farmer goes up to a donkey and explains that he's about to start training this one and the scholar watches in horror as he picks up a shovel and whacks the donkey right between the eyes with it. "My god!" he says, "what kind of loving kindness is that?" And the farmer

says: "Oh I haven't started on that yet. You see with these bastards, you have to get their attention first!"

And *attention* is another vital word. In ordinary life, attention wanders at random: and you hardly need psychological studies to provide evidence of that. How do you get on with taking in a radio weather forecast when you're driving? According to an eastern saying, without training the mind jumps around all over the place like a whole lot of monkeys in a tree. Well, you can't train an audience, but you can win it over slowly, woo it, develop group attention. And you can question any assumption that attention will automatically be there.

Trancing is a word I'll introduce to describe a state you can find an audience going into which is closely similar to a state of mild hypnosis. When you tell stories - all kinds of stories but especially highly imaginative ones with strong fantasy elements on the one hand or those which require people to search their own memories of, say, childhood experience to relate to what you're saying on the other - then you're doing something that is very similar to procedures used in hypnosis, especially in modern permissive hypnotherapy post Milton Erickson.¹²

Working with or against that is *torque*¹³, as in the 'twisting, rotational force' engineers have to cope with. In this context, I'm using it to describes the emotional pitch of an audience. There seems to be what you could almost call a powerful force of emotion at work in large crowds and you can feel this most strongly at mass sporting occasions - in my country at a soccer match say. Political rallies, evangelical meetings and rock concerts similarly surf on this mass 'power'. Public storytellers, for whom audiences are usually much smaller, most frequently work with smaller 'doses' of it but still need to consider it I think. The most logical explanation of this 'force' might be that we are, as it were, 'programmed' by evolution to respond to group mood, to follow the herd, get into fight or flight mode when everyone around us is doing that too, to panic (say) in order to survive. But however that may be, this word *torque* still seems to me a useful shorthand and a metaphor for the phenomenon, helping one to

avoid confusing a strong emotional 'herd' response with what I'll call a deeper level of communication.

Back to *flight*, those moments of lift off. I think this phenomenon is one of the things that gives storytelling a special edge. In a way, a told story is being created anew as a bargain between storyteller and audience. It's a curious thing, but I've become convinced that those invisible moments I referred to earlier of what, for want of a better word, I'll call inspiration (a very interesting word in itself) seem at the best to be experienced by audiences as well. Maybe it's a combination of storytelling *duende* or *conyach* and pure concentrated *craic/ramai*, because I don't yet know of a way of explaining it clearly, other than to observe that all sorts of subtle non-verbal communications go on between an audience that is really listening and a teller who's in focus and flowing, communication which might just work on and develop the extraordinary metaphorical language of a story in the storytelling moment, just as the strong 'emotional charge' present in some dreaming can push our personal metaphors towards greater complexity and symbolic force. In any case, flight though it's not something that happens all the time by any means, seems to me such an important possibility that it really needs flagging up strongly. Because actually it's invisible to an outside observer. Because actually it so often disappears completely in formal storytelling settings and we have only the simulated flight of over-rehearsed professionalism. Because actually for arts administrators and organizers and other people glancing in at a session, it doesn't really matter as long as the event happened. How was what?

Which brings me back to those traditional conceptions. You see it seems to me that it's possible to lose sight of the reason they were ever there, to explain them away as interesting little anomalies, essentially belonging to pre-rational societies but as useful to a modern scientific sensibility as phlogiston or Mesmeric magnetism. But I think that does them little justice. With any metaphor or description, it depends how you look at it, what you bring to it, how much you have already perceived that is relevant, how much you have already

preconceived that is irrelevant. And these old terms and I hope some of the new labels I've half playfully suggested, if you think about them, have the beauty of being open-ended - they can be used at a simple level or can be elaborated into complex symbols. Because there really are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies, which is why storytelling, which so often balances on the edge of possibility, is such a fascinating enterprise in which, in the words of an old song:

*You gotta stop on the red light, go on the green
Don't miss the mystery in between.*¹⁴

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¹ AA302 *From Composition to Performance: Musicians at Work* (The Open University 1998) quoting Foley, MK (1979) *The Sundanese 'Wayang Golek': The Rod Puppet Theatre of West Java*. PhD thesis, University of Hawaii. (UMI 1980) p. 261

² *ibid.* quoting Sutton, R.A. (1996) '*Interpreting electronic sound technology in the contemporary Javanese soundscape*' *Ethnomusicology*, 40/2, pp 249-68

³ Maurer, Christopher (ed.) 1995 *Federico Garcia Lorca In Search of Duende* (New Directions Publishing Corporation 1995) p.i

⁴ *ibid.* pviii From the revised version of *Deep Song* entitled *Architecture of Deep Song* in C.Maurer, FGL y su *Arquitectura del cant e jondo* (Granada: Casa-Museode FGL, 1997)

⁵ Krueger, Chuck - *Storylines* (Society for Storytelling Spring 1999) reporting on a workshop at the Cape Clear International Storytelling Workshop, October 24 -26, 1998

⁶ Shah, Idries 1964, *The Sufis* (Jonathan Cape Ltd. London 1964) pp.367-8 for more comprehensive translation showing Arabic roots etc.

⁷ Murray, Morag *The Kaif System in New Research on Current Philosophical Systems* (Octagon Press London 1968)

⁸ Ornstein, Robert *The Evolution of Consciousness* (Prentice Hall Press, New York 1991)

⁹ Ornstein, Robert *Multimind* ((Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1986) p.191

¹⁰ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, New York 1996)

¹¹ Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence* (British ed. Bloomsbury Press 1996) p.91

¹² For a lucid and concise explanation of hypnosis, see Joseph Griffin & Ivan Tyrrell *Hypnosis and Trance States* The European Therapy Studies Institute UK, 1998

¹³ I first introduced this term along with a description of focus and some other ‘qualities’ in *Three Angles on an Awakening Kiss*’ (Society for Storytelling Oracle series 1999)

¹⁴ Rev. Gary Davies , *Candyman*.