The When of Knowing

Jack Petranker
Center for Creative Inquiry

A commitment to logico-scientific forms of knowing still dominates organization theory. Recently, narrative knowing and sensemaking have emerged as alternatives, but these approaches still identify the past as the locus for knowledge. A third alternative, linked to concepts such as tacit knowledge, suggests that knowing can happen directly within the present but largely lacks the theoretical grounding that would make its practical implementation possible. To remedy this lack, this article introduces the future as a temporal locus for knowing. It distinguishes the told stories of narrative theory from the lived stories that shape human experience and invites a focus on the dynamic of the lived story rather than its content. A knowing open to the emerging, unknown future can be an invaluable resource for shaping organizational change, responding to a rapidly changing environment, integrating personal with organizational concerns, and exploring the ends that organizations serve.

Keywords: time; narrative; storytelling; sensemaking; knowing

A central tenet of the received wisdom is that knowing is possible only with respect to what has already happened. All knowledge is retrospective, if only because it depends on observation, which can only observe what just happened (Polkinghorne, 1988; Schutz, 1972; Weick, 1995). As Weick (1995) puts it, “People can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (p. 24). Applied to the field of organizational theory and strategic management, this has generally meant that knowing consisted of observing past events and trends, assembling the results as data, and using the data as the basis for testable theories and hypotheses on the one hand and plans of action on the
other. In all this, organizational theory has followed the scientific model as it is commonly understood (Chalmers, 1976; Nagel, 1986).

In the past few decades, a different model has emerged in which knowing consists of sensemaking and storytelling (Czarniawska, 1997). On this view, all knowledge is constructed. We can no longer claim to know what is so but can only tell stories that cohere in more or less fruitful ways (Rorty, 1989). This narrative view of knowledge has been put forward as the second great alternative to logico-scientific knowledge (Lyotard, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1988). Yet both alternatives share a fundamental characteristic. They insist that knowing is directed toward what has happened in the past.

What if the past is inadequate as a guide to determining appropriate conduct? The story we tell about what is happening today reveals a world undergoing massive and ever-accelerating change, where the past cannot tell us with certainty what is the right action to take now. For organizational actors, more and more decisions have to be made in what Schön (1986) calls the indeterminate zones of practice, where past models, rules, and the other basic building blocks of technical/rational behavior are of little comfort. Models of knowing that rely on sensemaking (Weick, 1995) or on the capacity of organizations to engage in continuous learning (Senge, 1994) are meant to deal with this difficulty by making knowing into something more active and immediate. Yet if they too must turn to the past as the locus for the knowable, they inevitably encounter similar difficulties.

It is natural to respond by challenging the claim that we can know only what has already happened and to maintain instead that we can know in the present (Heron & Reason, 2001; Park, 2001; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). As we shall see however, it can be difficult to ground this claim without careful reflection on just how it is that knowledge arises. This article is intended as such a reflection. Focusing on the structure of the story as a vehicle for knowing, it rethinks what it means to know present experience directly. The locus for such knowing, I suggest, is not the past but the future, not the known but the unknown. Given this locus, the key question is how to arrive at the unknown—how to make the future the source of knowledge—and the consequences of this shift for managerial practice and organizational change theory.

**KNOWING WITH NO WHEN**

I have observed in foolish awe
The dateless mid-days of the law,
And seen indifferent justice done,
By everyone on everyone.

—Edwin Muir

One way to view organizations is mechanistically, as a technological solution to the twin problems of imposing order and achieving results. In this model of organization as machine (Hatch, 1997; Morgan, 1997), the capacity for knowing is treated as beyond the reach of organizational actors. The knowledge that shapes organizational structures and guides organizational conduct is accessed before the beginning, when
the organizational machine is being designed and the rules governing its operation are being formulated. Just as a washing machine does not know the best setting for a load of laundry and a computer operating system does not know what the user wants of it, so organizations viewed as machines do not know how to respond to the challenges they confront. The knowledge available to them is encoded in artifacts such as manuals, procedures, and chains of command, and the organization makes its way by applying or invoking the rules these artifacts embody.

The organization as machine is in principle timeless, much like Newton’s clockwork universe. As Lewin’s (1958) famous unfreeze→move→refreeze model for organizational change implies, the properly functioning organization is frozen in time. The knowledge and intelligence meant to assure its success are built into its design, and there is no occasion in the course of its operation for new acts of knowing, which would only be disruptive. This is the model at work in the anecdote with which Bluedorn (2002) opens his recent survey of time in human organizations: The Kaiser of Germany, questioning at the outset of World War I whether it is wise to attack on two fronts at once, is sharply rebuked; the plan of attack having once been adopted cannot be altered.

Of course the mechanistic organization is timeless only in theory. In practice, unanticipated or unavoidable changes will cause a breakdown in the machinery, and at those times the organization must temporarily unfreeze (Lewin, 1958), reentering the flow of time. From the point of view of the timeless machine that constitutes the organization, such an unfreezing is literally a timeout, a halt to the (frozen) time in which the organization ordinarily operates. Think of a washing machine, chugging along with a soaking-wet load of clothes in its tub. If strange noises start coming from the machine, the first thing to do is turn it off. Only then, having called a halt to the time in which the machine operates, is it appropriate to apply improvisational know-how (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) or consult the manual to figure out how to fix the problem. In the timeless time within which the machine ordinarily operates, new acts of knowing are not possible.

This is not a very satisfying model. First, it seems to leave out a great deal of what organizations are all about, especially with respect to their impact on the human beings who are stakeholders in their operations. Second, machines themselves have become so complex that they often mimic the capacity for knowing in real time, a complication that a simple mechanistic model for the organization cannot easily account for. Finally, a “repairman approach” to dealing with challenges to organizations—one that calls a halt to operations to bring knowledge into play—is ill suited to the rapid pace of change, the generative complexity (Senge & Scharmer, 2001), that prevails in today’s organizational environment.

For all these reasons, it has become increasingly common to insist that organizations must be capable of acts of knowing (or learning) in real time (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1994); capable, that is, of operating like a living organism. As Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) write,

It is time to change the way we think about organizations. Organizations are living systems. All living systems have the capacity to self-organize, to sustain themselves and move toward greater complex-
ity and order as needed. They can respond intelligently to the need for change. They organize (and then reorganize) themselves into adaptive patterns and structures without any externally imposed plan or direction. Self-organizing systems have what all leaders crave: the capacity to respond continuously to change.

Fruitful as the organic metaphor for organizations (Hatch, 1997; Morgan, 1997) has been however, it is far from clear that it truly allows for knowing that happens within time rather than during interstitial timeouts. For in the prevailing scientific view, the capacity for self-organization and learning behavior in self-organizing organisms (mostly but not always biological) is attributed to the operation of limited perceptual capacities in accord with the application of a few simple rules laid down in advance (Clark, 1998; Wolfram, 2002). Seemingly intelligent and adaptive behavior manifests automatically, without the need for intervening acts of knowing. On this view, the capacity for knowing and learning manifested by self-organizing organizations (Wheatley, 1999) is a mirage. It offers the appearance of intelligence without the substance: learning at the level of stimulus and response.

KNOWING THROUGH TOLD STORIES: THE WHEN OF THE PAST

When you are in the middle of a story, it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion, a dark roaring, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood, like a house in a whirlwind, crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you are telling it to yourself, or to somebody else.

—Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

A convincing rejoinder to the analysis of knowing in the organic organization just made is that it looks for knowing at the wrong level. Any self-organizing system must interact with its environment, and for this it requires sense organs. In organizations, the sense organs are human beings, and it is the nature of human beings to be not only sense organs but sensemakers, giving meaning to the ongoing flow of experience and the structured accumulation of data. It is through such acts of sensemaking that knowing takes place within the organization. This is why the metaphor of the organization as a self-organizing system can seem so liberating in comparison to the mechanistic model: It calls on actors in organizations to exercise their capacity for knowing and for learning. Senge (1994) makes this point by quoting a union president being trained in dialog: “They hired me from the neck down. [Now] I have started to think, for the first time in twenty-five years” (p. xiii).

Here too however, knowing operates within sharply defined limits. As already noted, the human capacity for sensemaking is always directed toward the past (Schutz, 1972). People, says Weick (1995), “can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (p. 24). In that case, have we really come that far from the mechanistic model of the organization? In the mechanistic model, knowing happens before the beginning, completely outside of the temporal structure of past-present-future. In the sensemaking model, acts of knowing happen now, within time, but they are directed toward the past. In one case, knowledge happens before temporal events are set in motion, in
the other after they have unfolded. Thus, when Weick and Quinn (1999) want to modify the Lewinian change paradigm in the light of sensemaking theory, they can only turn it on its head: Do not unfreeze the frozen organization, but freeze (and then rebalance) the functioning organization. The underlying strategy remains the same: Know outside the flow (Purser & Petranker, this issue).

This analysis suggests that the sensemaking approach inherent in the organic view of the organization commits us to a rather remarkable claim. We are being told that we cannot know what is happening right now; that we can only know how things were in the immediate past. If the present is the when of our experience, we are being told that knowing is not inherent in experience but imposed from without, from elsewhen. We must choose between knowing and immediate experience for the two stand in conflict.

For anyone interested in decision making or strategic thinking, this is a painful restriction. Making sense of what just happened, we are literally blind to what is happening now; blind to what is happening now, how well can we prepare for what will happen next? As sensemaking theorists concede, every decision, every solution, will be something of a patch-up job, a quick and dirty fix based on “crude simplifications” (Weick, 1995, p. 123). We will remain forever temporally out of synch with what is going on, conceding our ignorance but acting because we must.

Does it really have to be this way? Do we really have to take our knowledge from the past rather than the present? Must we really interact with our world through the “medium” of mental models (Senge, 1994, p. xv)? To investigate this question, we must look more carefully at the structures and assumptions of the model that tells us that knowledge can be found only in the past.

**Narratives as the Medium for Knowing**

The “preferred currency” for retrospective sensemaking is storytelling (Boje, 1991, p. 106; compare Weick, 1995, p. 61). If “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5), the source of those self-generated webs is narrative. Narratives, or stories, are the basic vehicle through which human beings make sense of their lives (Czarniawska, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988; Weick, 1995). It is not surprising then that narrative has been placed alongside the “logico-scientific mode” of thinking that dominates in the mechanistic model of organizations (Schön, 1986, p. 3) as one of the two basic kinds of knowledge available to human beings (Lytard, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1988). Unlike logico-scientific thinking, narratives inherently make no truth claims (Polkinghorne, 1988; Rorty, 1989; compare Czarniawska, 1997, pp. 22-23); instead, they serve to make each situation meaningful, guide action, and constitute identity. As Polkinghorne (1988) puts it, “Narrative is the form of hermeneutic expression in which human action is understood and made meaningful. Action itself is the living narrative expression of a personal and social life” (p. 145).

Just as mechanistic models centered on rational planning and design in effect deny the possibility of knowing within the timescape of the functioning organization, so narrative models deny the possibility of knowledge in the ongoing flow of “pre-reflective” experience (Dreyfus, 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The assumption is that
without narrative, life lacks significance or structure, that time “reduced” to living presence or active dynamic reveals a senseless, mindless, and meaningless world. Thus, Ricoeur (1984) writes of the poetic or literary work that it “lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering” (p. 53); and Arendt (1959) tells us that only in crafting a tale does the actor engage his or her full humanity. Similarly, Weick (1995) calls life before stories a “flowing soup” (p. 128), an image akin to the description by Margaret Atwood at the head of this section.

On this view, life is lived in the dark until the act of narrative reflection illuminates it. Even the decision to take action now, in this present moment, depends on projecting a narrative in which the future state or outcome toward which the action is directed is viewed retrospectively (in the “future perfect tense”) as something that will have happened (Purser & Petranker, 2005; Schutz, 1972; Weick, 1995). In contrast to timeless mechanistic knowing, narrative allows for time and even depends on it. But narrative time appears only as what has already happened, which means that in the most crucial sense, it does not appear at all.

Something seems to have been left out. Contrary to narrative theory, we do not experience life as an ongoing darkness and confusion punctuated by moments of reflective light. Instead, it seems more accurate to say (paraphrasing Kierkegaard) that although we tell stories backward in time, we live stories forward in time. If life is a story, it is a story moving toward the future with a momentum that does not depend on the backward telling of narration. Even when nothing is “going on,” even if the thinking, chattering mind responsible for narrative falls silent, there remains the founding story that we are always living (Tulku, 1987): the simple and undeniable “Here I am.”

As the lived story that is our life unfolds, a steady stream of told stories may accompany it, making sense of the constant surprises, discrepancies, breakdowns, or interruptions that are our lot (Weick, 1995). Indeed, it seems to be characteristic of our mental operations that the storytelling mind is always at work (Petranker, 2003; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Still, all this is something like a bicycle rider shifting her weight from side to side to maintain balance. It is not these subtle shifts that constitute bicycle riding but the going forward through a landscape and toward a destination. Told stories take care of the anomalies and maintain the established order; occasionally they may reconstitute that order in fundamental ways. But for the most part, it is lived stories that grant our lives coherence, provisionally proclaiming both what’s happening and the way things are.

To clarify the distinction between the lived story and the told story, consider what happens when we dream at night. All at once, we find ourselves inhabiting a dream reality that exhibits its own coherence and order, its own ‘way things are’ and ‘what’s happening’. As the dream progresses, this lived reality—the ongoing story—unfolds with a vitality that no subsequent telling can wholly capture. At times there may be the need for sensemaking; for instance, I may struggle to explain to myself why the woman I was just talking to is now flying through the air on a bicycle. For the most part however, even in the chaotic worlds of dreams, I simply inhabit the story and live it forward.

To make the same point a different way, consider what happens when the lived story breaks down in some fundamental way. Here is a personal example: Some years ago I
left my house one morning to drive to work. When I got to my car, something was wrong. After a few seconds, I made sense of the situation: The car window had been smashed in and the radio stolen. But during those few seconds before sensemaking kicked in, I felt dizzy, even a little sick. A fundamental, taken-for-granted part of the lived story had collapsed, and I was at sea.

As a third illustration, consider a very short narrative related by Gabriel (2000), told by a kitchen worker complaining about the stresses of the job: “A few years ago, an Italian cook . . . he killed himself in the kitchen, he couldn’t take it any more” (p. 47, ellipsis in original). The cook’s suicide is the told story, but the narrator’s reaction (the cook “couldn’t take it any more”) reveals the story that is being actively lived. Lived stories, unlike told stories, invariably center on the self, which in turn helps explain why the lived story always moves forward in time.

Narrative theory does sometimes recognize the underlying, untold dimension of experience that I am calling the lived story. MacIntyre (1984) acknowledges it expressly when he writes, “Stories are lived before they are told” (p. 212). More consistent with the narrative thrust however, is to regard the lived story as a kind of would-be story, “a story in its nascent state” that constitutes “a genuine demand for narrative” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 74). The lived story’s independent significance—and potential priority—over the told story are not accepted, for in terms of narrative theory, only the told story makes knowing possible.

Again we have come face to face with the same dispiriting restriction on our capacity to know. We are being told that we live our lives in darkness and that light becomes available only through the reflected (reflective) light of stories; that we are doomed to live out our lives gazing at the wall in Plato’s cave. In our ability to tell stories and make sense, we are close to divine (Arendt, 1959), but in the part of our lives that we live instead of tell, we do not rise above the animals, and our ability to know is no greater than theirs. This is why Arendt (1959) views both man the maker (responsible for machines and plans) and man the actor (responsible for the narratives that give life meaning) as superior to man as animal laborans, who lives “automatically in accordance with life itself and outside the range of wilful [sic] decisions or humanly meaningful purposes” (p. 91).

**LIVED STORIES: THE WHEN OF KNOWING IN THE PRESENT**

To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.

—Emily Dickinson

The alternative to being stuck in the darkness of not-knowing is to find a source of light within present experience itself. Until recently, William James (1909/1947) was one of the very few to counsel such a step. Aware that he was making an outrageous claim, he suggested that to understand the workings of mind we should abandon ourselves “to a slovenly life of immediate feeling,” adopting a mode of inquiry that knows how “to lie flat on its belly in the middle of experience, in the very thick of the sand and gravel [through which the stream of consciousness flows]” (p. 277).
In these postscientific times, similar approaches are asserted with increasing frequency. The claim is that we can find ways to be fully present to our own experience and that doing so gives us access to different ways of knowing (Abram, 1996; Depraz, Varela, & Vermesch, 2002; Heron & Reason, 2001; Senge et al., 2004). A wide range of practices meant to make such a different knowing available are advanced, including meditative traditions, phenomenology, intuition, participatory research, dialogue, and the ways of knowing of indigenous peoples. In each case, to oversimplify somewhat, the point is to sink down into present experience and embody what is happening, letting go of preconceptions, mental models, and separation. Free from constructs, roaming in the “swampy lowlands” of experience (Schön, 1986, p. 3), we discover a new way of knowing, independent of both the logico-rational and the narrative. On this view, the told is the enemy of the lived; as Senge et al. (2004) put it, the absence of words can be the presence of understanding.

No one says this is easy. Vermersch (1999), in a sympathetic treatment of Husserlian phenomenology as a method for arriving at the immediacy of present experience, concedes that after nearly a century of phenomenological inquiry, it is not clear how much progress has been made. Senge et al. (2004), in their recent book on the possibility of knowing in the present, trace its arising in most cases to events charged with the drama of the unique and transformative. Among the examples that frame their discussion are cataclysmic fires, shared memories of torture, and solo retreats in remote regions of the world. Put simply, the reason that knowing in the present is so difficult is commitment to the past, to identity and the told stories that shape the lived story.

Viewed in light of the stories we inhabit, the problem seems still more basic. If we are always living a story, and if our present experience of the way things is precisely the contents of this story, it seems we will stay in the dark, for we have no way out of the story (Searle, 1999). It is like being trapped in a dream: As the events of the dream unfold, we are asleep, with no way to wake up.

In the end, the difficulty seems to be the self at the center of the lived story. For it is the self that sets the past in place of the present. As Tulku (1987) memorably puts it, “The self establishes itself and the world that it knows. . . . In one unified action it takes a position, posits a situation, and imposes meaning” (p. 147).

To be sure, there are narrative theorists and hardheaded scientists who are prepared to decenter the self, to proclaim it just another narrative told to make sense of what is happening (Bruner, 2002; Dennett, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1988). Yet decentering the narrated self does not yet mean setting aside past identities in favor of present experience, for the stories we live shape our experience at a level more basic than the stories we tell. Just as we see each day how the sun rises in the east, arcs across the sky, and sets in the west—despite knowing on the level of narrative that the reality disclosed by science is utterly different—so the self remains at the center of our experience even as narrative theorists rain down upon it one mortal blow after another.

Is there a way to give up not just the stories we tell but the stories we live, including the founding story of the self? Is there a way to live these stories differently so that they do not commit us so strongly to identities formed, confirmed, and consistently replicated in the past? Theorists of presence suggest that this is indeed possible; that the self ultimately has access to a direct knowing more fundamental than the subjective knowl-
edge available within our lived stories. As evidence, they cite the kinds of pre-reflective knowledge (Dreyfus, 1991) that Polanyi (1962) describes as tacit knowing and Schön (1986) calls knowing-in-action. It is operative when we perform such common tasks as driving a car, recognizing a face, or realizing a friend is unhappy. Such skills, they argue, support the existence of ways of knowing that do not rely on the conceptual and rational (Senge, 1994) and suggest the availability of a kind of artistry (Schön, 1986) that great masters in any discipline exhibit in all they do. Yet even if this is true, we seem to have traded one kind of not-knowing for another, the darkness of the pre-reflective for the mystery of the inexplicable. For as Schön (1986) observes, terms such as wisdom, talent, intuition, and artistry “are used as junk categories, attaching names to phenomena that elude conventional strategies of explanation” (p. 13).

Let us try a different approach. Instead of aiming to set aside the lived story for pre-reflective or intuitive knowing, let us consider how knowing can arise within the story itself, adapting for this purpose the concept of a fusion of horizons introduced by Gadamer (1975; cf. Bernstein, 1983).

The basic idea is this: If the lived story sets up the way things are and what’s happening—what Gadamer (1975) calls our situation—then that situation will be bounded in certain ways, which is to say that it will exhibit a “horizon” of the possible, the knowable, and the meaningful. At the same time, the lived story is always in flux, always responding to the flow of events. At certain times—perhaps through a chance encounter with another, or through deep engagement with art or nature, or through moments of insight, attainment, or great loss—a potential new story, bearing its own horizon of meaning, may appear. If the new story merges with the old, there has been a fusion of horizons. In this fusion of old and new, new knowing emerges. The lived story is not replaced but transformed.

A fusion of horizons at the level of the lived story involves much more than changing mental models (Senge, 1994), theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1974), or stories that make sense (Weick, 1995), though such changes may all play a role. In the fusion of horizons itself (rather than the new vistas the fused horizons reveal), a new capacity for knowing makes itself available. For without a way of knowing differently, how can a new story merge with the old? How does the new knowledge available within the fused horizon emerge, and what gives it the power to take the self beyond the truth of the story as it was before? For an answer, we must look to what is always beyond—the arising of the future.

**THE UNKNOWN AND THE WHEN OF THE FUTURE**

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

—T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

Because the future has not yet arrived, it has no content and thus offers nothing to know. But this is only a first take. For a more nuanced view, we should distinguish
three aspects of the future. The first is the future as a grid for measuring events: what we could call the objective future. The objective future tells us that if today is Tuesday, tomorrow will be Wednesday. It is the time of the plan and the calendar, which we use to chart what will happen. Stretched out along a single dimension stretching from now to the end of time, it is the model for the timeless time of the logico-scientific way of knowing, in which direct and immediate knowing is unavailable. It tries to lay in advance what has not yet happened in order to subject it to manipulation and control.

The second aspect is the subjective future, the time of fantasy and anticipation, hope and fear. Centered in the past, the subjective future emerges out of story time, presenting the future perfect of the what-will-have-happened. It has much to do with desire and (especially on the social and organizational levels) with manipulating images of the future. But its link to knowing is tenuous, for its knowledge is based mainly on extrapolation from the past. Classic phenomenological accounts of time (Turetzky, 1998), including those offered by Augustine, James, and Husserl, all give priority to the subjective future.

The third aspect of the future is the future as the ever-emerging flow of time, free from all limits and measurements. On the one hand it offers no content, for it is before content; on the other hand, it offers the whole of what is and has been and could be. It is in this aspect of the future that the potential for new knowing chiefly lies. We can call it the dynamic future.

For a sense of these aspects of the future in operation, consider what happens when you take part in a casual conversation (compare Weick, 1995, p. 50). As you start to speak, do you first decide what you are going to say and then say it? In that case, you have laid out the future in advance, making it into the timeless objective future. Do you say a part of what you have in mind and then step outside the flow of what you are saying to assess what needs to be said next in light of what has already been said and the reactions it evokes? In that case, you are shaping the subjective future in light of the way things are and what’s happening, crafting the ongoing, sensemaking story of the self and its world. Or do you let your intention and understanding guide you, trusting less in the preconceived or presupposed and more in a capacity to improvise as you go along? In that case, you are allowing yourself to be guided by a knowing inherent in the dynamic future of the unknown.

Of these three modes of participating in a conversation, it is of course the third that interests me. As we move along in the course of saying something, we often have no clear idea of what we are going to say next. It just happens. Yet somehow a knowing guides the saying. Where does that knowing come from?

A natural reply is that the knowing that lets us improvise speech comes from the lived story of who we are, how things are, and what is happening. That answer may be adequate to account for the kind of conversation in which two speakers exchange pleasantries or the conventional wisdom or rehearse well-established positions. But it does not really account for the sense that we often do not know what the next words out of our mouths will be and do not even know what we think until we say it (Weick, 1995). To account for that experience, we can apply once again the metaphor of the fusion of horizons. In subjective time, it is stories whose horizons fuse, their contents merging so that each contributes to a more coherent way of making sense of what is
happening and the way things are. But in dynamic time, it is past and future that fuse horizons. The dynamic past as carrier of the whole of the way things are merges with the dynamic future, carrier of what can be. With no story or content to limit its working, the dynamic future in its arriving both brings the past to completion and annihilates it, so that it is no more. We can call this fusion the dynamic present.

In the fusion of past and future, knowing necessarily lets go of what was previously known, entering the unknown. Usually we are not aware of this entry into the unknown because we have already turned from dynamic time to subjective time. We are intent on living the subjective story forward, affirming identity by integrating the what’s happening into the way things are. But even if we choose to live the story again and again, we can always choose in the next moment to allow for the dynamic of the future as it arises in this moment; can allow for the fusion of horizons between past and future that makes the present at once unknown and a locus for active knowing.

In a dynamic, unknown present, we would not lose the stories that constitute the past, but we would let go of them. In this letting go, the stories themselves would become newly available to knowing, entering as stories into what’s happening and undermining the fixed certainties of the way things are. Something like this can happen spontaneously at critical junctures in our lives, when we suddenly become aware we have been living out a story about who we are and what has made us that way, a story we are free to change. Just so, when past and future fuse horizons, the stories we are living stand revealed. In effect, the way things are merges completely into the what’s happening. The past changes character, metamorphosing from subjective conditioning to dynamic availability.

The fusion of the future with the past happens in the dynamic of the fusion itself. With the commitment to the past inherent in sensemaking defused, a new knowing becomes available. The stories we continue to live forward are freely chosen, shaped not by what has gone before but by our intention. And our intention communicates itself forward not in the repetition of the past but in the arriving of the future.

Of course, it may not happen that way. Even if we set out to welcome it, there is always the risk that the dynamic future will devolve into the lived story, that the unknown and unrestricted future dynamic that infuses the past with the potential for new knowing will become its own story—first as an inhabiting and in time as a telling. But this will not happen if we are ready to welcome the fusion of past and future. If we give up our hold on the past, we can receive it back as a present from the future, stripped of the commitment to story and identity and the way things are. So the question is this: Are we ready to welcome the “radical recasting of the whole” (Bergson, 1911/1944, p. 362), the “gathering together” (Tulku, 1990, p. 484) of all that is? Are we ready to let the freedom of the unknown future illuminate and render transparent the structures set in place by the stories of the past?

The resource that will let us do this is what Senge et al. (2004) call a sense of purpose, and I prefer to call intention. By intention, I mean a capacity for action in which the given historical circumstance—the always arriving past—is informed by the basic awareness through which human beings know themselves to be, an awareness more fundamental even than the founding story of the self (Tulku, 1987), though inseparable from the basic awareness through which we know ourselves to be, more fundamen-
tal than any story, deeper even than the founding story (Tulku, 1987) of the self. Intention takes form in response to the immediate circumstance of subjective past and subjective future but goes deeper than the form it takes or the actions through which it unfolds. To paraphrase Dee Hock (as cited by Senge et al., 2004), intention is like genetic code, not because it offers a blueprint for what we shall become or do (for blueprints have to do with plans and stories) but because only the knowing encoded in the genes makes it possible to become or do anything at all.

To bring this analysis down to earth, I will close this section with discussion of an example dealt with at length by Weick (2001); the operations of the Worker’s Defense Committee (KOR) in Poland during the late 1970s. As described by Jonathan Schell (1985), the KOR accepted the reality of living in a highly repressive regime and decided to act within it. Through many small actions, each growing out of what was possible at that moment, they succeeded in working a major transformation in society. At each step they rejected the story that insisted that they were not free to act; exercising what Schell calls “militant decency,” they began to live out a future consistent with their intention to move Poland toward democracy. They told no new stories and acted on no grand plan; instead, they treated each situation as the “decisive point” (Tulku, 1990, p. 484). They allowed the dynamic of the future to begin to transform the way things were. Schell describes the strategy as follows:

Start being what you think society should become. Do you believe in freedom of speech? Then speak freely. Do you love the truth? Then tell it. Do you believe in a decent and humane society? Then behave decently and humanely. (p. xxx)

Weick (2001) analyzes this historical incident in the categories appropriate to subjective time: sensemaking, storytelling, retrospective understanding, and a focus on identity. And indeed, the story of KOR could be presented in terms of individuals enacting a reflectively imagined future perfect. But this interpretation does not do justice to the revolutionary impact of what KOR’s members did or to their sense that what they accomplished was impossible. Instead, KOR can be seen an example of successful action informed by knowing centered in the dynamic future. Where Weick (2001) speaks of “living one’s beliefs” (p. 469), I would speak of acting from intention. Free from the story’s commitment to the way things are, free even from allegiance to a dream of what is possible, KOR relied on intention to accomplish what the prevailing stories would not allow for. Moving from an initial story of what could be achieved, which they refused to accept, to an always emerging story shaped only by the dynamic future, it helped transform Polish society. KOR discovered the time of action, the time of the future, when new knowing gives rise to a new reality.

It is no accident that I have chosen to illustrate the potential for knowing inherent in dynamic time with a political movement that helped shape a bloodless revolution. It is in times of revolution and radical upheaval that the prevailing stories grow more transparent, until the conditioned past is reborn by degrees as the unknown future. In Arendt’s (1965) words, revolutions announce “that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold” (p. 21). Yet the quality of new beginnings, of the future fusing with the past to create a present open to all possibilities, is available in
principle in every organizational setting and circumstance, including those where “revolution” would not be welcome. As Tarthang Tulku (1990) notes, playing on the sense of the future as emergent, each newly arising moment is the decisive point in an “ongoing emergency” (p. 484).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS: CREATIVE INQUIRY AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

For [a poet] the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.

Rainer Maria Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

Fusion of the Told and the Lived

Stories are more than mental models (Senge, 1994) or theories-in-use (Argyris & Schöon, 1974). Human beings craft or invent or adopt models and theories, but they live stories, including the story that constitutes the self. As long as the focus is on told stories, this distinction is obscured because so many stories are simply about plot and about making sense—poor relations (from a logico-scientific view) to theories and explanations. On the other hand, lived stories are normally too absorbing, too constitutive of who we are, too bound to an unexamined past to allow for new ways of knowing.

Still, lived stories offer other possibilities. The stories we live are constantly in flux, constantly being reshaped, told, and retold with new emphases, new episodes, and new meanings. This flux makes the fusion of horizons possible. A manager with a compelling story to tell can fuse that story with the lived story of others in the organization to create shared vision; he or she can literally inspire others by bringing the story to life. As Thayer puts it, “A leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the meaning of that which they do” (as cited by Weick, 1995, p. 10).

There are other ways to fuse the told and the lived; for example, through participatory inquiry (Park, 2001), action inquiry (Reason & Torbert, 2001), and appreciative inquiry (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). And even without a fusion of horizons, telling alternative stories or exploring alternative scenarios (Senge, 1994) can be a useful way to challenge lived stories and told stories alike. At the very least, telling a story can be a way to infuse with light stories that have previously been enacted amid the shadows cast by what is presupposed.

On the other hand, it is possible to mistake the told story for the lived, leading to what could be called false-light subjective fusion. When this occurs, a shift in a told story can pass itself off as a shift in a lived story. This happens for example when a fantasy or daydream of accomplishment substitutes for actually doing something, when compliance is mistaken for commitment (Senge, 1994), or when espoused theories are not distinguished from theories-in-use (Argyris & Schöon, 1974). Organizations too can get caught in false-light subjective fusion, convincing themselves through plausi-
ble stories invoking a subjective future that they are on the right track, or that their problems are about to be resolved, until events make painfully clear that they have been living more in dreams than reality. In small groups or teams, false-light subjective fusion may for a time generate intense excitement and feelings of commitment. Yet attempts to live the story of a story lack the sustaining dynamic of the emerging future. In the end, they will founder.

To avoid such detours and diversions, managers need first to develop skill in learning to see stories in operation at both the lived and the told levels. Much of the work of Argyris and Schön (1974) is directed at cultivating just such skills. A capacity for future-based knowing centered in dynamic time rather than in the content of subjective-time stories can take this set of skills to a deeper level; for not getting caught in the stories of others depends in large part on being able to step outside the stories one tells and lives oneself.

It could certainly be argued that managers have no incentive to do this and every incentive to pursue their own self-interest, the interest of their division, or office, and so forth. But the need for new kinds of knowing is real and may be strong enough to make the journey into an undetermined future attractive. If we assume that new knowledge yields more positive outcomes (whatever the scale for measuring positive and negative may be), the transition to a future-centered knowing may generate its own momentum, one that can counter the pull of preestablished positioning and conditioning (Tulku, 1987).

With a greater ability to see stories in operation, managers have a wide range of options. At the level of the subjective future, they can consciously set about changing stories that are told both by others and by themselves, with the aim of changing the stories that organizational actors live. If they are willing to go deeper, they can explore changing their own lived story, learning to inhabit that story more fully, so that the implied truth of the way things are and what’s happening comes more fully into view. Finally, they can let intention infuse their work and their perceptions so that it infuses their knowing as well.

The core competency in all this is clarity about the difference between the lived story and the told story. As Argyris and Schön (1974) have worked out in exploring the difference between espoused theories and theories in use, one path to such clarity is honest and open dialog, for when lived stories are brought into the open and shared with others, more clarity is the natural outcome. Framing such inquiry in terms of theories however leaves too much of the lived story out of account. The stories human beings live are all encompassing, like the water in which fish swim. The lived story gives not only the sense of self and the world in which the self lives but such basics of experience as distance, separation, temporal flow, mood, and the feeling of knowing (Petranker, 2003). To explore at this level will require moving beyond the practices advocated by Argyris and Schön and others to engage the lived story at the most fundamental levels.

Consider in this light an observation made by Schell (1985) with regard to the success of KOR, the Polish political movement discussed earlier. The members of KOR, he writes, discovered that “precisely because totalitarian governments politicize daily life, daily life becomes a vast terrain on which totalitarianism can be opposed” (p.
Much the same could be said of lived stories, which constitute the totality of the way things are and what’s happening. Because the story reaches everywhere, it can be questioned everywhere. The range of approaches for cultivating such questioning is vast (Depraz et al., 2002; Petranker, 2003; Senge et al., 2004; Tulku, 1994). From the perspective developed here, what all these approaches share is an ability to dwell within the lived story with ever-increasing awareness, resolutely choosing not to accept the truth of that story.

**Fusion of the Future and the Past**

When the past is where identities take shape, positions are adopted, and the way things are comes into being, the future is limited to subjectivity. But when the future is dynamic—nothing more or less than the always arriving unknown—the lived story of the past can be informed by an intention that does not depend on stories and thus does not dictate identities and positions. Then the horizons of past and future can fuse with one another, allowing for that different way of knowing that goes beyond subjectivity, variously referred to as vision, insight, artistry, creativity, or intuition. To put it differently: When the limitless horizon of the dynamic future fuses with the ever-present horizon of intention, the past is freed from the insistent claims of its all-informing story. It becomes the present in a way that leaves it open for a differently grounded knowing to emerge (Purser, Bluedorn, & Petranker, in press; Senge & Scharmer, 2001).

Here too there remains a possibility for what I have called false-light fusion. If intention is taken over by story, the dynamic future becomes the subjective future. The shift can be subtle and difficult to recognize, for when the future does emerge into the present, the experience can be deeply illuminating and fulfilling, inspiring a sense of transformation whose glow may linger even as a new lived story begins to take shape. And the content of that story may center on a version of the self so different from the old that it seems to have gone beyond self. The thought-provoking discussion of the future as a source of knowledge in Senge et al. (2004, Part 4), consistent in many ways with the analysis here, seems to teeter at the edge of this risky intersection of dynamic and subjective future.

The powerful tendency for dynamic future to devolve into subjective future may be a primary reason for the failure of so many efforts at organizational transformation (Senge, quoted in Webber, 1999). For managers who wish to avoid this trap, to learn to rely on intention rather than stories, inner training and discipline will be necessary. The way to start is by living the story completely, embodying it fully. This will not be a pre-reflective embodying, which would close off the dynamic future; instead, it will be an embodying of the aliveness within the lived story so that the what’s happening interrogates the way things are. If this sounds more like a meditative discipline than a managerial skill, perhaps it will help to think of it as a reformulation—at the level of embodiment rather than theory or story—of the distinction between single-loop learning (governed by the way things are) and double-loop learning (open to the dynamic of what’s happening) (Argyris & Schön, 1974). It is also related to the process that Bohm (2003) describes as suspending assumptions, in the specific sense of holding them sus-
pended before us. It will be a process at once analytic and engaged, participatory and removed. Certainly its cultivation will be a challenge for managers, academics, and consultants alike, but there is a growing recognition that such challenges are necessary in the conditions faced in the organizational world today, that the times call for unusual methods and approaches (Reason & Torbert, 2001; Schön, 1986; Senge & Scharmer, 2001). Perhaps this widely acknowledged challenge can serve as a countervailing force to the tendency to turn from the unknown, with its inherent threat to the established and the taken for granted.

I have referred already to various methods and practices discussed in the literature that encourage questioning the story and staying true to intention. Here is a test for such methods: Do they cultivate a kind of inquiry that emerges out of the unknown future on the basis of an unconditioned past? Do they develop skill at being present “at the point . . . in each experience where the future could be said to come into being” (Tulku, 1994, p. 99)? For it is when the arising of the future opens the story to questioning that intention can manifest without obstruction.

What of the charge that intention is just another story, another mysterious capacity, like intuition or insight, invoked to put an end to inquiry rather than further it? The best answer is that once inquiry is underway, intention manifests within each story in an ongoing fusion of dynamic future and embodied present. Investigating the story, one investigates the capacity to investigate, a capacity not dependent in any way on the story itself. The more that capacity is exercised, the more intention is free to emerge. Intention is thus something like Descartes’s cogito: the bedrock for inquiry, free of all content. It is the starting point for future-centered knowing, a starting point that does not recede into the past but remains always available.

**CONCLUSION**

What benefits can be expected from cultivating this new way of knowing? A first answer is that such a knowing will adapt more readily to change, for instead of being imposed on events in an act of sensemaking, it is inherent in what is happening. Weick (1995) suggests that managers should not require that the stories they rely on be accurate, only that they be plausible. But this counsel holds only because in a sensemaking model there is a trade-off between increased accuracy and immediacy of response. If knowing is inherent in what the future presents, no such trade-off is necessary. Each response can be at once wholly appropriate and immediate, an instance of what Purser and Petranker (2005) call *deep improvisation*.

Toward the end of the first part of this article, I asked whether the organic metaphor for organizations could adequately account for organizational knowing given the primitive capacities for knowing in self-organizing systems as they appear in nature. I started the next section by suggesting that this difficulty could be resolved by thinking of human actors as the sense organs of the organization, both perceiving and making sense of all that transpired. However, this was an answer bound to past-centered know-
ing. In future-centered knowing, a sense-organ/sensemaking model no longer applies. In the fusion of the ever-arriving future with an intention-centered past, a knowing inseparable from the whole of what appears—a knowing adequate to each new circumstance—emerges in each instant.

Beyond a heightened capacity for more responsive and accurate decision making, a future-centered knowing of the whole offers a second benefit, potentially more far reaching than the first. David Hume (1740/1978) famously wrote that “Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (p. 415). Organizational theory, like all of social science, is in large part built on that premise. As a result, questions about purpose, intention, and meaning have long been exiled to the dark and unexplored realms of the wholly subjective (MacIntyre, 1984; Tulku, 1987).

A knowing centered in the future and shaped by intention rather than stories can help redress that balance. Because it asks the questions that underlie all stories, because it questions the stories themselves, it brings to light concerns that otherwise dwell in obscurity. In a world where so much that human beings value seems jeopardized, it offers a way of knowing that could initiate the “deep transformative process” (Senge & Scharmer, 2001, p. 240) these times seem to demand.

The fusion of horizons between past and future has the potential to go in two completely different directions. In one, which I have called false-light fusion, past-centered stories hold sway, and it is the desires and fears of the self (Argyris, 1993) that have priority. In the other, intention has priority. Prior to content and identity, intention does not call us to a particular way of being but opens us to the dynamic of being. In the end, this dynamic is inherent not only in what’s happening but also in the way things are. For to say that things are is to say that they act, that they conduct the dynamic of the future (Tulku, 1994). When we rely on intention to let the dynamic of what appears emerge, our own actions can accord with our intention. Acting on the basis of a future-centered knowing, we find ourselves on a journey of discovery. In action, we discover our own intention, and we enact it. We find that we take the right actions and make the right responses. The knowledge we discover along the way may not be the knowledge we thought we were setting out to get, but this does not make it any the less important.2

NOTES

1. In conformity with the prevailing approach (Polkinghorne, 1988), I am using the words narrative and story more or less interchangeably; for a contrary take, see Gabriel (2000). However, I do distinguish between the two in the following way: Narratives can only be told; they are always retrospective and past centered. Stories can be either told or lived. Told stories are past centered and synonymous with narratives; lived stories are future centered. Told stories can become lived stories, a point on which I have more to say in the following. Polkinghorne’s (1988) broad definition of narrative would encompass theories, plans, models, and so forth, but for the most part, these structures seem better associated with the kind of rational-technical knowing that I have called timeless.

2. My thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and detailed comments.
REFERENCES


