
Collective Centring and Collective Sense-making in the Stories and Storytelling of One Organization

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Abstract

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A vivid illustration of shared storytelling, collective centring, and collective sense-making appears in this study of one non-profit organization. Organizational members identify two stories that express the collective sense and allow centring on the shared meaning. Sense-making in a structurally closed organization is demonstrated. Organizational dynamics and root metaphors are examined and several approaches to the analysis of organizational myth and story are utilized. Dissonance between organizational members and the president is apparent even though the organization is rooted in a unitary reality.

Descriptors: corporate culture, communications, organization theory, storytelling, sense making

Introduction

The significance of story and storytelling is apparent when one reviews the current body of published research. The study reported here demonstrated story and storytelling as a symbolic form by which groups and organizational members construct shared meaning and collectively centre on that meaning. The everyday conversation of organizational members as well as the formal communication of managers are ingredients in the construction of shared meaning. Central to this study was the hypothesis that organized meaningful action emerges from shared meaning, and that storytelling is an effective form of communication for the construction of a collective sense and for connection with deep meaning. The goals of this study, therefore, were to describe the shared meaning (organizational reality) that emerged from the collective centring and sense-making processes in the organization studied, to identify themes that were indicators of the collective sense, to discover if the themes of stories told reflected the organizational reality, to examine shared storytelling as a vehicle for collective centring and for constructing shared meaning, and to explore shared storytelling and co-creative sense-making as an approach to developing shared purpose.

A private, non-profit organization of 300+ members (fictitiously called *Friendship International* in this article) was the focus of this storytelling study. As a former member, I had access to the organization and familiarity with the organization's history.

Briefly, the research design involved stories being told in two structured storytelling events during which the study participants reflected together on the stories told and heard. These storytelling events were conducted with all of the mid- and upper-level managers at a quarterly conference and with all of the organizational members in one region of the United States during an annual conference. The themes that emerged independently in both storytelling events were used as organizational themes in the study. (The themes were explored and confirmed in interviews with six organizational members in the Southwest Region who had not been involved in the storytelling events; the president and former president were interviewed also.) These organizational themes were reported back to the storytelling participants in a report following both of the storytelling events. The report included a survey of four well-known stories that were possible touchstone stories. Participants of the management storytelling event were then interviewed. Two stories were identified by the study participants as capturing the essence of *Friendship International*, expressing the collective sense (shared meaning) of the participants, and enabling the participants to collectively centre on the meaning they shared. The analysis of the stories, the culture, and the organizational dynamics demonstrated in this non-profit organization make this an unusual study.

Background Research on Story and Storytelling

There is a deep and varied literature on myth, story and storytelling from which to draw. The collage of works from the literature on myth and story that informed this study included: (a) Mahler's (1988) assertion of myth as collective meaning; (b) Campbell's (1988) description of myth expressing essence; and (c) the work by Agmon and McWhinney (1989) on deep story as prime guidance process. From the literature on storytelling, the research relevant to this study included: (a) Georges' (1969) conclusion that storytelling events warrant the study that stories receive; (b) Robinson's (1981) finding that listeners collaborate in storytelling; and (c) Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm that proposes a way of interpreting and assessing stories by linking values and action. The link between story and action enables an examination of collective sense-making and enacting shared purpose in organizational life.

The particular works regarding organizational story that informed this study were: (a) Smircich and Morgan's (1982) findings regarding ethos and culture expressed in the organizational stories of an insurance company; (b) the themes and dualities inherent in powerful stories identified

by Martin and Powers (1983); (c) storytelling as an organizational problem-solving process in Mitroff and Kilmann's (1975) work; and (d) the re-mythologizing work in which McWhinney and Battista (1988) have been engaged.

Method

Approach to the Study

The design of the study reported here was intentionally explicit, conscious, and participative. The study was phenomenological and symbolic, framed by Burrell's and Morgan's (1979) interpretive sociological paradigm viewing organizations as cultures. Within this paradigm, organizational reality is constructed through the interactive processes of culture and communication. In the study reported here, structured storytelling events scheduled during organizational conferences enabled an exploration of purposeful storytelling as a means by which a group can collectively centre itself on purpose and construct shared meaning. Ideally, it should be possible to see congruence with the shared purpose and meaning in the link between the stories told and actions taken by organizational members.

The design of the study was influenced by the work of Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Reason (1980). Guba and Lincoln's (1985) presentation of interdependent participant-researcher relationships in naturalistic inquiry and Reason's (1980) discussion of reflective and self-directing inquiry led to the participant's reflection on story themes and identification of essential story elements and touchstone stories in the study reported here.

An intent of the study was to launch an intra-organizational conversation about story, storytelling, and organizational essence that had creative and self-directing potential.

Conceptual Grounding

Collective Sense-making

Sense-making is found in the organizational symbolism literature (Pondy, Frost, and Morgan 1983; Louis 1980; Smircich and Calàs 1985; Weick 1969, 1976). Collective sense-making can be understood as the process whereby groups interactively create social reality, which becomes the organizational reality. While meaning exists that is not shared by all the members within a group, this study was aligned with the position that groups develop a body of universally shared meaning and act on the basis of that shared meaning. The shared meaning may appear as the intersection and/or overlap of several different perspectives co-existing within a group or as a dominant shared sense of meaning.

Building on the work of Pondy, Frost, and Morgan (1983), one can blend the sense-making metaphor of organizational symbolism with a social constructivist perspective. Shared storytelling can express shared experience *and* be used to construct a collective sense.

In the study reported here, four approaches to sense-making are proposed; these illustrate the four systems of thought in McWhinney's (1989) work on paradigms and system theories. The first approach to shared meaning illustrates a dynamic model, which assumes that expressions of shared meaning are descriptive of what is current. Traditional work in anthropology, for example, has been done from this approach.

The second approach, rooted in a communicative model, assumes that shared meaning is negotiated or accepted; and developing shared meaning, therefore, requires group membership, time spent together, and shared experience. The research of Louis (1980) and Smircich (1983a,b) used this approach and focused on the socializing and enculturating aspects of shared meaning.

The third approach to constructing shared meaning (sense-making) illustrates an evolutionary model: shared meaning evolves over time. This evolution of meaning can take place in a group either insulated from rival ideas or in the midst of a strong rival culture.

The fourth approach to sense-making is based on a field model in which shared meaning is consciously co-created by participants. Work in this vein has been done by Berg (1985) and by McWhinney and Battista (1988).

Stories of experience can bring to light unsolved dilemmas and tensions as well as a sense of purpose. Rich and textured stories can express the collective sense, the shared knowing. The study reported here concentrated on stories that expressed the collective sense and identified the approach to collective sense-making demonstrated in the stories of one organization.

Collective Centring

In addition to aiding collective sense-making, storytelling can collectively centre (or focus) a group. Although I have yet to uncover any empirical research on the concept of collective centring, the concept is akin to 'centring' (Mink, Shultz, and Mink 1979), 'alignment' (Harrison 1984), and 'purposing' (Vaill 1989). Mink, Shultz, and Mink (1979) described centring as the process by which a person, group or organization fundamentally focuses or organizes and thus achieves unity. For the study reported here, collective centring was defined as the process of focusing on organizational essence.

Preliminary Study

I grounded the concepts of collective sense-making and collective centring in a preliminary study with an athletic organization and a ballet company in which the athletes and dancers deeply understood sense-

making and centring (reported in Boyce 1990). A season of pre-game, half-time, and post-game team meetings were taped as were individual interviews with players and coaches of a men's college basketball team over the 1988 basketball season. Documented in the preliminary study were organizational stories, story themes, a touchstone story, a communicative approach to sense-making in which meaning is consciously constructed and negotiated, and an intentional use of shared storytelling to centre the team. The essence of this team was expressed in the phrase, 'tough, smart, and unselfish'. Team members used this phrase to centre themselves individually, and as a team.

In the second organization, a ballet company, two storytelling events with different participants resulted in organizational stories, story themes, a touchstone story, an understanding that the company used an evolutionary approach to sense-making and informal shared storytelling among the dancers to centre collectively. In this case, the touchstone story captured a conflict in values between the director and the dancers.

Shared storytelling centred these athletes and dancers on essence and purpose. It reminded them of what they had chosen, of what was important. From this centred place, they consciously engaged in collective sense-making and determined and chose organizational actions that expressed purpose. Both organizations in the preliminary study used shared storytelling as a vehicle for sense-making and centring. The sense-making approaches they utilized were clearly described by the athletes and dancers, and were documented on tapes of stories being told and tapes of team meetings.

The study with Friendship International was designed and conducted with structured storytelling events in order to explore shared storytelling as an intentional vehicle for collective sense-making and collective centring in an organizational setting. If the structured storytelling events proved to be an effective way for organizational members to construct shared meaning, shared storytelling could be utilized by organizational members and managers in a variety of settings as a method for centring and sense-making.

Storytelling Events

Friendship International is a religious organization devoted to converting international students to the Christian religion while they study in the United States. The organizational members are generally college and/or seminary educated, lower and middle class, and diverse ethnically. They range in age from their early thirties to early seventies, and share a deep vocational commitment to ministry. Friendship International (FI) has 300+ members working full-time in a structurally flat organization. There are one vice president, one development officer, and eight regional directors at the mid-manager level in addition to the president's and vice president's staffs. The regional directors are located

around the United States. (The headquarter's operation also has a finance officer as an upper-level manager, an accountant, two human-resource personnel, and numerous other secretaries and clerical staff. These persons were not involved in the study.)

The organizational members, functioning with relative autonomy at sites near university and college campuses all over the United States, develop local ministries that involve volunteers from churches in the area, student leaders, and funding from local churches and individuals. A clear sense of organizational mission and purpose is essential because this dispersed collection of individuals represents the national organization and makes decisions on local and regional levels.

At the time of the study, one of the regional directors was female; the rest of the management group was male. In the organization as a whole, the female-male ratio was 22:17. In the Northwest Region, where part of the study was conducted, the female-male ratio was 3:7.

The first of the two — similarly structured — storytelling events was conducted during the 1989 Annual Staff Conference in the Northwest Region. The second storytelling event was conducted with mid- and upper-level managers at a quarterly, national meeting. Each event took four hours, and included: (a) an introduction to the study, (b) a warm-up storytelling exercise, (c) segment 1, telling individual stories of experiences in the organization, (d) reflecting on the themes heard in the individual stories, (e) segment 2, telling collective stories of what is central to the organization, and (f) discussion of key organizational stories and the touchstone story concept. In the regional session, the storytelling participants were divided into groups according to longevity in the organization: zero to three years, four to nine years, and ten or more years. At the management session, a single group met together. After a warm-up exercise in which each participant told a story to one other person, the shared storytelling process began with a recorded, 45-minute segment of telling individual stories of members' experiences in the organization. As the participants became engaged in the storytelling, they became attentive to each other (as opposed to being polite); the stories flowed from one topic to another, and the participants became more focused. Overall, the stories expressed the emergence of membership and the development of identification with the organization.

Then, each small group worked together to identify the themes present in the stories told during this segment and reported their themes to the group as a whole. The themes that emerged during this segment of the storytelling events, as identified by the participants, are shown in Figure 1.

The second segment of the storytelling was the telling of collective stories. As we shifted to collective stories, we were looking for key organizational stories that reflect the organizational sense — stories expressing what is important in the organization. In each event, about an hour was spent telling collective stories.

Figure 1
Discussion of
Themes in
Individual Stories

Themes in Story Text: Northwest Event/ Members	Management Event/Mid- to Upper-level Management	Found in Both Groups
Vivid first impressions		Vivid first impressions
Staff diversity and experience		Many staff coming to FI with ministry experience
Sense of belonging, family and unity	Being part of, being needed	Staff feel needed by FI
Individual visions	FI is unique; Vision of ministry is stable and consistent	Staff possesses clarity of broadened vision
Rise and fall of 'model' ministries, work continues	Organizational change / useful growth	Organizational/ administrative changes and strategy changes have occurred
Lack of direction/new staff need more structure	Early lack of staff training/current increased level of training	
Freedom to develop the ministry		
Fund-raising concerns		
	Leadership	
	Sacrifice	

As the participants moved more deeply into telling collective stories, they honed in, in a circular way, on what was important to them. That sense of 'honing in' was an indicator of the centring process to the participants, and also to me. In both storytelling events, the general feeling in the group as they centred could be described as: 'Here we are. This is what we do. This is what we strive for.' The collective stories in Friendship International focused on ministry with students. Stories told during this segment included these two:

'Tak came from Japan to Seattle several years ago and [had] had contact with a missionary in Japan . . . [who] gave Tak our phone number; so when he came to Seattle, he called us. . . . He came over and met frequently with . . . [my husband], and they talked about the Bible and about Christ, and . . . he accepted the Lord. I guess as involved as he was as a Marxist, he became really involved as a Christian; put everything into it. . . . [My husband] met with him regularly and had Bible studies with him and . . . I suppose, he disciplined him in some ways. (I don't know if they actually called it that.) Then, Tak went back to Japan and . . . became involved in a church and developed a young people's group called 'Heart to Heart'. And the group of young people in that church, there were about three of them when Tak arrived, and by the time he left, two years later, there were 20. . . . Many of them had accepted Christ and were growing in the Lord. . . . [After some years and additional

training himself] Tak is planting churches in Hiroshima. . . . This story shows the whole sequence of a student coming to Christ here, being disciplined and trained, and sent home and God has been faithful to him.' (Regional meeting, Group 3, lines 433–470)

'[We got to know] a Chinese research scholar. . . . He was a fellow who would come to Bible studies regularly. . . . [An international student from Japan] led him to the Lord. . . . I had four months of time with him before he was going back home. . . . He went back home and . . . wrote that he had led his family to the Lord. . . . He began leading Bible studies. . . . He began to relate to us that he noticed that most of the ministers he knew anything about in China were old men, and he wanted his sons to go into the ministry. . . . [God worked out the details] and I met . . . [his son] at O'Hare airport last September; took him up to the seminary nearby. . . . In the process of the time [in school], he met a Chinese girl from Singapore. . . . I had the privilege of officiating at their marriage. . . . He's got a few terms left to go and he's going back to China. This is his burden — to be involved in ministry back home.' (Management meeting, lines 1739–1787).

Analysis

Themes and the Collective Sense

The material gathered from the storytelling events (and from the subsequent interviews) was transcribed and analyzed in two ways: First, by identification and cross-checking of themes for contextual validity and participant recognition; second, by applying the narrative paradigm (Fisher 1987) to stories containing touchstone elements. This was similar to the method Boje, Fedor, and Rowland (1982) described for 'myth-making' when they suggested that myth analysis requires identification of themes before the myth 'logic' can be derived.

The lists of themes that participants had identified in the storytelling events were compared, and the themes which emerged independently in the stories told in both storytelling events were explored and confirmed in interviews with six organizational members in the Southwest Region (who had not been involved in the storytelling events). These themes are: (a) divine involvement; (b) relationships with international students (by staff and volunteers) over time and across distance; (c) commitment to friendship evangelism; (d) commitment to 'discipling' (developing spiritual maturity through a teaching relationship); and (e) long-term impact that is demonstrated by the religious contribution of a student after she or he returns home. A brief explanation of the themes and samples of how they are woven through the stories follows.

Divine Involvement

The phrase 'divine involvement', used by a study participant, captures the deep belief that God is involved in the lives of the organizational members, the volunteers and the international students. Ultimately, the

vision for the work with international students is seen as God's vision.

'I met a fellow in the main post office of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and my habit was to give any foreign student I [met] some information about [FI] in the Boston area. And, he called me up and said he'd like to know more about what we do. . . . We arranged to go out to a Greek restaurant for some coffee. I told him a little bit about the many friendship programs, but then I also told him about a series of Bible studies that we offer in the Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ. . . . He said, "Well, then I've come to the right place"'. And he proceeded to tell me about when he was a young boy in China before the revolution. He used to meet weekly with a Chinese lady to study the Bible, and how much this lady loved him and he even started to cry there in that Greek restaurant. He told one other example of a Christian person that he had known in college days that had been made fun of but he respected that individual. And now, he had finally been able to leave China . . . and we started studying the Scripture together. . . . We may not be the first Christian that a foreign student [meets]. Somebody else who was faithful . . . was influencing that life many years ago. And the way the Kingdom of God works is that influence stays alive. . . . *God is weaving that web of faithful witnesses around the world and in different generations . . .*' [emphasis added]. (Management meeting, lines 1553–1582)

Relationships Across Time and Distance

In the 'best' FI stories, relationships with international students are continued after the students return to their homelands. This theme of relationship was also apparent in stories told by both the former president and the new president in interviews. Sample stories expressing this theme follow.

'Our second friendship family was from Indonesia. . . . We got to know [him] . . . and then he brought his family over and we got to know them. . . . They were here until he got his Ph.D. The children were up into junior high school by that time and they went back home. . . . It is amazing what God has done with [their] children. One of them will be graduating from [a Christian school] next year . . . and the daughter eventually came to [a state school in the U.S.] and has become very active in our fellowship. . . . She has a real desire to serve the Lord. I'm discipling her.' (Regional meeting, Group 3, lines 500–560)

'There's the story of Tuisem. . . . We met him . . . and recruited him for [FI]. . . . He, then became our director for the Buffalo area and while he was there we sent him back to Nagaland [in Northeast India] to evaluate with the Christian leaders there what the greatest need for Nagaland would be. And together they decided that the greatest need was for a Christian college. . . . So, he decided to go back to school and get his Ph.D., which he did at Buffalo. . . . Tuisem then went back [to Nagaland] and we helped . . . him in the formation of a U.S. [Board]. . . . Now, he has over 600 students in the school.' (Interview 2, lines 813–858)

This theme of relationships with international students has two shadow aspects: A controlling quality in the relationships of organizational members with students, and organizational members behaving possess-

ively about their relationships with students. The controlling or parental quality, as pointed out by the president, drew attention in an interview to something that he wanted to address and to see changed during his tenure as president.

'One of the aspects of the ministry that I want to emphasize during my time here is that it really is a two-way street, that it is not that we are paternalistically giving some crumbs to these poor internationals that are coming, but that these are significant peer relationships. . . . There is still a subtle paternalism of the "ministers" to the "ministees".' (Interview 1, lines 443–452)

The controlling quality is subtle as participants describe the international students as persons in need of guidance and of a parental kind of caring.

'I want to tell a story of a little Chinese girl. . . . She needed a place to stay and she was invited to come and stay in the house. Well, as we got acquainted, one day she came downstairs and asked if I would give her a party. It was going to be her 21st birthday. . . . I said . . . "I will be very happy to give you a party and invite your friends from the university to come but there are [sic] two things that we can't have at the party. One of them is alcohol and the other one is dancing (which was going on then). . . ." It proved to be a very wonderful time of communicating with [her] of what we do in [FI] as far as just providing not only a need but taking the opportunity to be of service.' (Regional meeting, Group 3, lines 599, and 611–626)

The president and other organizational members want to encourage a model of mutual, peer relationships. The president's model follows immediately and a comment from an organizational member follows after that:

'I want to have the involvement of engineers befriending the graduate and undergraduate engineering students. I want to get the medical doctors with the premed. students. I want to get the businessmen with the econ. majors. I want to get the woman who has given up her career to be ministering with the spouses that are coming along, because many of students that come to study do bring their spouses with them. I want to connect peers.' (Interview 1, lines 463–470)

'[FI] emphasizes that we're going to receive as much as we give and there isn't this idea that we're the big white missionaries coming in and we've got the big answer because we don't. And . . . I have acquired so much from the students who have become Christians and who *are* Christians, as far as understanding about Christ that I wouldn't [understand] otherwise. And, I think [FI] really encourages that.' (Regional meeting, Group 1, lines 658–665)

The second shadow aspect to the theme about relationships is staff behaving possessively about their relationships with students. Again, this shadow aspect is subtly laced through stories as organizational members tell about their relationships with students, and it emerged in the interview with the president, who said:

'If I were to look at [FI] critically, I would say that we've been a very possessive group in that "these students are my students", and "I want to keep them in my Bible study", and "I want to keep the correspondence with them". They [the organizational members] are seeing themselves in isolation rather than as part of the whole.' (Interview 1, lines 652–657)

A long-time organizational member confirmed that there seems to be an unspoken rule in the organizational culture that, once someone had begun befriending or working with a student, that relationship would not be infringed upon by other FI members. A student is essentially unavailable to other people if they are in relationship with someone already.

As indicated in the quote above, the possessiveness is also demonstrated in organizational members not referring the names of international students who are returning home to the organizational headquarters for follow-up support. Members of FI hold onto student relationships as though they are personal possessions, instead of regarding their contribution to that student as one link in a chain, a piece of a larger process — even though this larger process is acknowledged verbally.

Commitment to Friendship Evangelism

Friendship evangelism is a phrase that means a witness of Christianity and the winning of converts that occurs within the context of relationship. FI members are openly Christians and explicitly interested in talking about Christianity. The opportunity to talk about God and Christianity evolves in the course of friendships, which, as perceived by FI members, are brought about by God, who is opening up the opportunities to 'share the love of God'. The theme of friendship evangelism is present in the story of befriending the Chinese scholar in Cambridge that appeared earlier and another example of this theme follows.

'It's a thrill for me when I have the opportunity to share with students and it seems to be affirmed that I am communicating and the Lord is speaking to somebody's heart. The other day some students were at our house for lunch. . . . I said that, when a person becomes a Christian, God gives us peace and joy, and one of the students said, "The Japanese don't have that". It was like, something really clicked for him. . . . He said, "When I come back from my trip I want to study the Bible together".' (Regional meeting, Group 1, lines 532–547)

Commitment to Discipling

After an international student becomes a Christian, members of Friendship International are committed to seeing this person develop spiritual maturity. The words the members of FI use for the teaching relationship that encourages spiritual growth, similar to Catholic religious formation, is 'discipling'. One of the goals of Friendship International is to see international Christians disciplined and prepared to return to their homelands and make a spiritual contribution there. The theme of discipling

is present in the stories of Tak and of the Indonesian family that appeared earlier. This theme appeared in other stories as well. One of these follows:

'Bakht . . . came to Canada as an engineering student. Someone gave him a New Testament; someone connected with the YMCA there. He read that and he became a Christian, and the Hayes family really nurtured him spiritually and also helped to take care of him physically. Mrs. Hayes had wanted to be a missionary and had not gotten to be a missionary, but she poured out her life in the life of Bakht And Bakht . . . went back and now the record is after all of these years he's started over a thousand churches in India. . . .

The Hayes family were [Christian people], not volunteers of [FI]. They just exemplified friendship evangelism, you might say, discipleship. . . . The Hayes family *did* stay in contact with him.' (Interview 2, lines 68–77, and 743–753)

Long-term Impact

Members of FI assess the long-term results of their work by pointing to the spiritual contribution an international person makes when he or she returns home. While most of these international efforts have no official tie to Friendship International, these contributions are highlighted in the stories of Tak and of Bakht; and they also appear in other stories, a number of which are told by the former president. One of these stories is given below.

'There's a little village by Mt. Cotapaxi in Ecuador called Quisínche, and from that village one of the Quechua Indian ladies did some domestic babysitting. . . . One of the families brought her to Washington, DC, to take care of their children. . . . And so once she was there she just kept moving from family to family . . . [working]. . . . She came to one of the Bible studies that our staff held in the Spanish language. . . . She was converted and was growing as a Christian.

About two years after that, in the mid-'60s, she came to me and said that she felt that she should do something for her people in Ecuador. And we began working on that. She gave us \$20,000 that she had saved and then donated some family property back in this village of Quisínche, a plot of land. So, [some people] went down and stayed about a year and developed the Evangelical Center of Quisínche. We developed [FI] Ecuador to manage this and [the Center] got the interest and support of a lot of Christians in Ecuador. . . . It started in Washington, D.C. with a little lady who no one would pay much attention to. She was not well educated, but she was converted away from home and she had a vision for her own people, and then, with her, [FI] has been able to stimulate that.

Within the next few months I hope to go down there and turn that project over to the Quechua Indian Christians.' (Interview 2, lines 912–949)

Summary of Themes

'Win-Build-Send' was a phrase suggested during the management storytelling event as a descriptor of the central purposes of Friendship International; it summarizes the themes. The organization is focused on *winning* international converts, *building* them into mature Christians, and *sending* them back to their homelands where they are linguistically

and culturally prepared to exert influence and make a contribution. The themes listed above and the expression, 'Win-Build-Send', are indicators of the collective sense the participants share.

Belief System and Collective Sense

There is also a belief system shared by the participants that lies beneath their membership in this particular organization and is an important component of the collective sense. This collective sense, incorporating the world view within FI, provides the base for the shared understandings of the members on an evangelical, Judeo-Christian belief system.

The presence of an unalterable belief system as part of the organization's collective sense complicated the study of the concept of collective sense-making in Friendship International. Components of the collective sense are listed below with commonly accepted essential, shared elements of the evangelical, Judeo-Christian belief system grouped together as one item; but its parts, as described in the organizational Statement of Faith, are listed in Note 1. The collective sense includes:

1. The evangelical, Judeo-Christian belief system.¹
2. God has a comprehensive, global, ministry network utilizing Christians in many groups.
3. The principle of 'reaching people away from home' is inherent in the story of Pentecost in the New Testament book of The Acts of the Apostles.
4. Evangelism is a task for all Christians, not just those committed to a life of religious vocation.
5. People are receptive to new ideas and new relationships while they are away from their traditional social and religious constraints.
6. International students represent the next generation of world leadership, and involvement with students studying away from home gives Christians an opportunity to influence long-term international relations.
7. Involvement with international students allows Christians to influence the spread of Christianity in countries that are 'closed' to Christianity.
8. Because age and life experience are respected in many cultures of the world, the age (and organizational longevity) of organizational members and volunteers with FI is not limited to the organizational norms of the United States.
9. International students studying in every country should be a target population of the national Christians in that country (extension of 3).

The evangelical, Judeo-Christian belief system can be pictured as a foundation and steel-like structure around which the organizational members construct the organizationally distinctive aspects of their collective sense. They accept the beliefs in 1 as true, prior to joining the

organization; therefore, there is no consciousness of having assembled the foundation because it is accepted as truth. They recognize the other elements of the collective sense (2–9) as meaningful and logical extensions of the truth in the Judeo-Christian foundation.

Touchstone Story

During the second storytelling event, the managers identified essential elements to a touchstone story. As in the discussions of story themes, the participants proposed a list of touchstone story elements (see Figure 2). These touchstone story elements are similar to the story themes presented above and are contained in the four stories that were selected as possible touchstone stories.

Figure 2

Touchstone-Story Elements

- the vision of ministry to internationals is embraced by staff
 - divine involvement
 - the importance and value of prayer
 - relationships over time and distance
 - a collective venture (other organizations and people are involved)
 - the vision is shared with churches and volunteer families
 - a 'win-build-send' organization, and
 - students return home and make a contribution there.
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The link between values and action in possible touchstone stories was assessed using Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm, and it was found that these stories express values that are central to Friendship International and the values are linked to actions that are taken daily by organizational members. The application of the narrative paradigm provided a model for analysis and an external perspective to the analysis; however, the results concurred with what organizational members were identifying, and the additional layer of the narrative paradigm added no new information to the analysis.

Four stories containing the essential touchstone story elements were sent in an early report and survey to all 33 of the storytelling participants. (These stories were of Tak, Tuisem, Bakht, and the volunteer couple in Buffalo.) The report identified the themes that emerged in both storytelling events, the list of touchstone-story elements that were proposed, and the narratives of four possible touchstone stories. A stamped, survey postcard asked participants to check several things: Were the themes I perceived emerging from both events accurate, from their perspective? Were the touchstone-story elements, as listed in the report, accurate from their perspective? Which of the four stories best described the work of FI to you? They were also asked to indicate if they wanted me to call them for further conversation.

Twenty-five of the 33 returned the survey card. Fourteen (60.9 percent) selected the story of Tak as the touchstone story, and four (17 percent)

selected the story of Tuisem, and four (17 percent) selected the story of Bakht. One reported that no single story would work as a touchstone. None selected the story of the volunteer couple. One participant asked why the story of Mako was not being considered as a possible touchstone story. The story of Mako had been told in the management storytelling event and overlooked as I listened to the tapes and looked for stories that contained the touchstone-story elements organizational members had identified. It appears below as it was published in an organizational magazine.

‘ ‘If you’ve become a Christian’, the letter read, “then you need not come back to Japan”. But Makoto Yamashita went anyway. Three months after enrolling at Trinity Seminary in Chicago, Mako was on his way home to win the support of his wife and father [for his change of vocation]. . . . Mako’s wife and father are now believers, and Mako completed his seminary studies last spring. Today he pastors a church in Okayama ken, Japan. But the going was not easy.

Nearly five years have passed since he was led to Christ by Masaki Kakitani, the [FI] staff member in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was attending school. . . . Like many returnees who hope to convert family and friends, Mako received an icy welcome. Yet nothing could snuff his desire to talk about his relationship with Christ and to seek fellowship with other Christians.’ ([FI] *Doorways*, 1980/1981)

The iterative and reflective design of the study heightened attention to the feedback that the Mako story was a key one. I began to circle back to learn what was missing. It was possible that the study participants and I had failed to glean all the essential elements of a touchstone story. The challenge of identifying a touchstone story is finding a story that contains all the essential elements and/or dynamics present in the organizational reality. A touchstone story is “loaded” with all that an organizational member has identified, consciously or unconsciously, as central to the organization.

Analysis of Organizational History and Dynamics

Friendship International is an unusual organization that presents a vivid illustration of shared storytelling, collective centring, and collective sense-making. Unresolved, organizational tensions and recent organizational developments along with root metaphors of the organization were examined as part of the study and became part of the analysis of the organizational reality. The analysis reported here includes a discussion of how the organization functions systemically, a description of the unitary reality of Friendship International, process observations made during the study, and the follow-up to the study.

Unresolved, Organizational Tensions

Following the inquiry about the story of Mako, I was able to reach 11 of the 13 participants in the management storytelling event by phone. I told them about the feedback that a story was “missing”, and asked each one

if the story of Mako, or another story, best expressed what Friendship International was about. Presented with a second opportunity to select a touchstone story, 8 of 11 participants (61 percent) stated that the story of Mako contained the elements of purpose and values for which they were looking. (The results of the telephone interviews with six individuals in the Southwest Region are reported later in this article.)

The story of Mako contains the entire cycle of ministry for which organizational members were looking, as does the story of Tak; however, the story of Mako also includes three unresolved, internal, organizational contradictions. The cycle of ministry in Friendship International is befriending, friendship evangelism/conversion, discipling, contributing/witness, and sustained friendship/follow-up. The story is made more rich by containing the organizational contradictions which are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Organizational Contradictions in Touchstone Story

- national-international vs cross-cultural ministry
 - Christian international returning home vs staying in the U.S.
 - discipleship and non-ordained involvement vs theological training and vocation
-

The first contradiction in the story of Mako is a cross-cultural one. In this story, the person who converted Mako is a Japanese on the staff of FI in the United States, and this relationship with Mako leads to a Japanese-Japanese friendship and conversion, not a cross-cultural friendship and conversion. The cross-cultural and the national-international element appear later in this story with the friendship of the American volunteers in Chicago rather than at the time of the conversion in Atlanta. (This is not how the cycle of ministry is idealized by participants in the study. They describe cross-cultural friendship developing first as the context within which a conversion takes place.)

The second contradiction is the shared value of international Christians returning home. In the story of Mako, the international man on the staff of FI in the United States has not returned home to Japan. There is an organizational contradiction between the value of internationals returning to their homelands and the reality of many internationals choosing to stay in the United States or go to other places in the world instead of returning home. The student who becomes a Christian returns home, as the shared value prescribes, and yet the international staff member has not returned home; herein lay the reality and the contradiction.

The third contradiction was pointed out by a participant in the study. It was significant to the participants that, following his religious conversion, Mako had abandoned his earlier objectives for being in the United States (for which he was attending school in Atlanta) and had enrolled in seminary. While members of FI acknowledge that many international

students are engaged in academic and professional pursuits which they are obligated to complete, it is significant that both the stories of Mako and of Tak are about newly converted international Christians who pursue formal theological training in order to assume full-time vocations as clergy in their homelands.

Individual Interviews

The possible touchstone stories, including the story of Mako, the touchstone-story elements, the story themes, and the feedback that something was 'missing' were explored in six, face-to-face interviews with organizational members in FI's Southwest Region. The purpose of these interviews was to see if other organizational members recognized the essential touchstone elements and possible touchstone stories that had emerged from the structured storytelling events. The interviewees recognized and confirmed the themes. Four of the six individuals selected the story of Mako as the story that best expressed the purposes of Friendship International.

In the telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews combined, 12 out of 17 (70 percent) of the persons interviewed selected the story of Mako as the touchstone story. This was higher than the percentage (60.9 percent) of storytelling participants who had selected the story of Tak as a touchstone story — an important, but not a definitive, selection of a touchstone story.

Organizational members identified that the stories of Tak and of Mako contain the cycle of ministry that has been at the core of Friendship International. The introduction of the story of Mako and the support for that story as a touchstone story suggested that the contradictions are also part of the shared reality. Levi-Strauss (1966) proposed that myths contain and resolve contradiction in an unconscious and illogical way. Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983) similarly concluded in their study that organizational stories '[hold] irreconcilable alternatives in suspension' (1983: 448). The study with Friendship International did not uncover the particular dualities these researchers found in their study; however, in the story of Mako, the contradictions in FI are held in suspension.

It may also be that the stories of Mako and Tak touched the organizational members on an unconscious level. Since all of the study participants had made the choice of religious vocation themselves, perhaps they were responding to stories that contained the element of a religious vocational choice. It is possible that the participants resonated with these stories for reasons beyond those that they were able to identify.

The story of Mako presents organizational contradictions in a way that participants recognized and responded to; for while this story expresses the purposes and values of Friendship International, it contains, along with the whole cycle of ministry, three, unresolved contradictions within the organization.

Recent Developments in the Organizational Story

There are three recent developments that relate to the organizational story of Friendship International. First, a shift from the founding vision to a diminished vision. Second, the design of new ministries that are aligned with the founding vision. Third, the focus of the new president on volunteers. These developments are described briefly below.

The founding vision of Friendship International in 1953 was to 'establish a witness for Christ in every nation'. This vision had diminished by the early 1980s as members of the organization focused on developing local ministries that seemed to produce both strong Christian international students and the support and involvement of local churches. As organizational members became less focused on the 'big picture' and placed emphasis on evangelism and discipling, the strategies of evangelizing and discipling became the diminished vision.

Following the path of strategy as vision, the new president rewrote the organizational vision to describe what the organization has been engaged in: evangelizing, discipling, and preparing for service. Establishing a witness in every nation was lost as an overarching vision. Although organizational members expressed uncertainty about the vision changing, in the fall of 1990 the Board accepted the rewritten vision as an acceptable rewording of the founding vision.

The second development highlights two stories told during the storytelling events and repeated in the interviews with the former and new presidents of the organization. These stories present examples of sense-making within Friendship International by international staff who returned to their homelands of the Philippines and Uganda. The demand of unique situations and the processes of interpreting fundamental premises led these staff members to interpret and deduce an expression of the organizational purpose for each situation that was congruent with the founding vision. Their actions were recognized by colleagues and leadership as situationally appropriate responses to need. What stands out strikingly is how directly these stories align with the founding vision.

'Bak . . . is from Uganda. He came as a [seminary] student. . . . We got to know him well and know his vision for Africa. He went back to Africa, but it was during the time of Idi Amin and so he operated out of Kenya . . . and would take trips up into Uganda to keep in touch with the Christians. . . . [Bak] shared with us a vision that he had of developing ministry in Uganda. . . . The plan has two prongs. One is to reach Africans here and develop fellowship groups for them, and the other is to develop churches and small businesses in Uganda. . . . Through our sister organization, Transformation International . . . he's getting families to raise milk goats so that they will have a source of food and he's getting them small things like sewing machines, and other things that they can do to help themselves, and forming fellowships among the Christians. Several churches have started through his ministry over there.' (Interview 2, lines 862-889)

Cito . . . worked with us [in New York City] for a number of years; married an American nurse, and together they've gone back to the Philippines. He

started an exciting ministry there [with] a lot of emphasis on agriculture; getting Christians involved in projects. Also, they have a quilt-making project and other things that they're doing to help Christians support themselves and reach out to others. He's developed a ministry to internationals that's very productive and exciting. So, he had a two-pronged ministry. One to internationals, and then to the national Filipinos, helping them to develop churches and self-supporting means, so that they can do good work as a church. (Interview 2, lines 893–911)

These stories illustrate a classic approach to sense-making that was interpretive and deductive. With this approach, international staff, unaware of the diminished vision, centred themselves on the founding vision and interpreted it as they framed ministries in new situations.

The third development was the president's shift of focus from national staff to volunteers as the chief group to accomplish the vision. Instead of recognizing the whole cycle of ministry as the vocation to which these generalists are committed, he envisioned organizational members as the trainers of volunteers to perform these tasks. This was the critical disjuncture between the president and the organizational members, however, at the time of the study; it had not been identified by the study participants. The disjuncture became apparent in an interview when the president selected the story about volunteers working with an international student as his touchstone story, and approximately 70 percent of the study participants selected the stories of Mako and Tak. The president's touchstone story was as follows:

'A [volunteer] couple in Buffalo . . . 15 years ago, took a student into their home. . . . They disciplined him, and they felt like they had become father and mother to him. This student then went back to London. . . . instead of going back to Uganda, where he came from. Because of the wars there, he went to Nairobi, [and] became a successful businessman. And just last November, the President [of the country] asked him to come back and be the Director of General Purchasing for the country. And part of the reason that he was chosen was that he was a Christian and he had built up a trustworthy reputation as a Ugandan businessman in Nairobi. When I met this couple, they had just returned from visiting this man and his family in Nairobi [before he left to] take this new responsibility.' (Interview 1, lines 400–416)

Friendship International has three periods in its history delineated by presidents. The first 15 years with the founder as president, the second 20 years with the former president, and a third period taking shape with the new president. The story about this president, the Board, and the members of the organization is still developing. A renewal of the founding vision or the acceptance of a revised, diminished vision is yet to occur across the organization as a whole.

A Political Analysis

From a political perspective, this study seemed to present the president with an opportunity to shape the shared meaning and the stories told among organizational members. The president provided a lengthy opening interview during which he shared his vision and his touchstone

story, and expressed interest in the organizational culture and history. The timing of the study seemed ideal.

In the first storytelling event, organizational members were reluctant to tell stories of their experiences until they were assured that the study was approved by the president and that he expressed interest in the stories and the findings that would come out of the study. He and the vice president assured me that any organizational problems uncovered in the course of the study would be addressed forthrightly.

The research process was protected from the president's direct involvement by using as story themes those themes that participants identified as present in the stories told during the storytelling events. The first phase of the study, the storytelling events, uncovered no support for the vision and direction espoused by the president; however, the responsiveness of the participants to the story of the volunteer couple was explored by including it as one of four possible touchstone stories. The story of the volunteer couple was not selected as a touchstone story by any of the study participants. Later in the study, when an extra round of interviews was requested, access was restricted to management-level participants; and, from this point on, the study was ignored by the president. An intra-organizational conversation of co-creative storytelling and founding myth did not occur; and the final report went to participants from the president's office without comment or attention. The president received complete study analyses and findings.

Although using storytelling to align organizational members with the direction of the president was not a goal of the study, the storytelling process prepared participants to engage in a conscious process of change or renewal. A whole cycle of ministry emerged as central to the work of organizational members. Immediate progress toward the organizational changes the president had chosen did not emerge and support for the focus on volunteers needed to be forged in a subsequent process. When the themes and stories emerging in the study did not confirm the president's desired direction, the study became invisible.

The Root Metaphors Explored

The vision and purpose of Friendship International is perceived by the members to be anchored in The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. Even though the leaders or the organizational strategies change, the organization's interpretation of the stories in Acts remains unchanged; i.e., people become Christians while they are away from home. Two root metaphors describe the universal human processes upon which Friendship International is focused: 'quest' and 'home'. McWhinney (in conversation 1989) proposed that a root metaphor expresses a central human process or emotion and usually lies beneath conscious awareness.

The Metaphor of Quest

As an ancient youth may have set out on a quest in order to gain the knowledge, wisdom, and experience needed to become a contributing

adult in his society, so an international student sets out on a quest for knowledge, wisdom, and experience. Wound into the quest metaphor are four elements that are retained in the stories of Friendship International. These are seeking wisdom (or truth), the vulnerability of the seeker, finding wisdom (or truth), and returning home as adults.

International students are recognized as seekers of wisdom (or truth). In an academic or professional sense, they want to learn and leave home in order to gain an education, knowledge. In a spiritual sense, they are seeking answers to questions that have been unanswered for some time. The root metaphor of quest is expressed in the story already cited about the Chinese scholar who had studied the Bible as a child and sought someone else with whom to study the Bible while he was in the United States.

The second element in the metaphor is vulnerability. Someone on a quest is vulnerable to being taken advantage of or mistreated, as well as to accepting new ideas. International students are vulnerable while they are away from the social and religious structures with which they are most familiar. These ideas are expressed in a manager's description of the vision, and in the former president's description of students taking new ideas home with them.

'[Even in the 1950s the vision included], "We don't have to go overseas to be a foreign missionary. The world has come to us." . . . A very primitive working out of the "Acts Plan" was presented back then. . . . That [internationals] can be reached here while they are away from home. The "away from home" idea, *the vulnerability idea is there* [emphasis added]. . . . Seeing them come to Christ, disciple them, and send them back home.' (Management meeting, lines 1089–1104)

' . . . it was finding a new ideology when they were away from the restraints and the social pressures of their home country which is exactly what we say happens to people who come here. They're open to new ideas. Either they will become enamoured with materialism, or secular humanism, or there's an opportunity for us Christians to share the Christian faith with them, and that can be an option if we will take the opportunity to share with them.' (Interview 2, lines 581–596)

The third element in the metaphor is finding wisdom (or truth). An international student on a quest, finds the wisdom (or truth) for which he/she comes looking, which includes the securing of the education, knowledge, and, for some, it includes finding spiritual understanding. FI members find some international students ready and willing to talk about religion and God and believe that an international student who 'finds' God has had a successful quest.

The quest is concluded by one's return home; and the return of international students to their homelands is essential for the journey to be completed. The questor returns with knowledge, maturity and readiness to contribute.

These four elements — seeking wisdom, vulnerability, finding wisdom,

and returning home — express the first root metaphor of Friendship International. This metaphor was woven through the stories as FI members described the students with whom they have had relationships. The metaphor was well illustrated by the stories of Bakht and of Tak (which appeared earlier).

The Root Metaphor of Home

Very close to the emotion of returning from a quest, the metaphor of home expresses the centrality of where one belongs, or where one is from. The stories in Friendship International are filled with references to where one is in relation to home — being away from home, returning home, being at home. The founder was away from home when he first discussed the idea of an organization like Friendship International. He returned home several years later in order to found FI. Organizational members who were away from home, working overseas, joined FI when they returned home. Even the story of moving the headquarters from Washington, DC, to Colorado has the theme of home — finding a home. International students, away from home, became Christians, and returned home.

These two root metaphors of quest and home tie the stories of Friendship International together. They express powerful human themes that lay underneath the stories told in this organization.

Remythologizing as an Approach to the Analysis

McWhinney's (1988, 1989) process of remythologizing focuses on founding myths and organizational renewal. Friendship International retained its sense of connection to the 'Great Commission'. The connection to the stories in Acts remained strong; yet the understanding of the founding vision *still* shifted. By tying the vision solely to Acts, the organization denied the importance of the founder. The loss of the founder's story included a loss of his unbridled zeal and passion for an immense vision.

McWhinney and Battista propose a living myth (1988: 47), a concept similar to the touchstone story proposed in this study. The organization attuned to a living myth is self-reflexive and can recognize opportunities and actions that are congruent with the organizational purpose. The founding myths were engaged actively by the staff members overseas, by the new president learning about the organization and by this study. The attempt to identify a touchstone story initiated an intra-organizational conversation among organizational members and managers about the central processes of the organization, and could have become part of Friendship International engaging in a self-reflexive process around vision and purpose. (This is discussed further in the section on follow-up.)

Process Observations

Some observations about focus and intensity, social control, and dissonance in Friendship International are shared here. Focus and intensity is

expressed in FI as commitment and zeal for evangelism. Zeal is necessary in order to do this work and it is evident in the stories as a propelling force. The storytellers described it as 'possessing the vision'. The kind of zeal expressed in Friendship International is similar to that found among religious orders, select branches of the military, political action committees, and social action groups.

Although it was a goal of this study to explore storytelling as a co-creative process for developing shared purpose, it became apparent that Friendship International had a high level of social control that made the co-creative aspect of the study impossible to implement. Beyond the parameters of the study, in Friendship International, storytelling was used broadly to influence, to persuade, and to communicate; however, stories of experiences that do not support the shared point of view were not told. Stories of the founder, from whom the organization distanced itself, were only now being told again by the new president. These stories were untold for 20 years.

Many of the stories told during the course of the study contain the cycle of ministry to which the organizational members are committed. The achievement of shared goals is expressed in the stories of students who have returned home. The shared reality is supported by organizational members through storytelling; and those who cease to share the reality, leave the organization. (Leaving is discussed further in the follow-up of the study.)

Collective Centring Demonstrated

The storytelling events within Friendship International demonstrated collective centring. The participants each began by describing their own experiences and gradually 'honed in' on the expression of the shared sense. When collectively centred, the participants expressed feeling good about their work with the organization.

In each of the storytelling events, when the group completed the process of individual and collective storytelling, the participants were in sync. As a group, they were at a beginning point; they were ready, together. They could have moved easily from this point into a collaborative effort. If the storytelling events had occurred at the beginning of the conferences, the organizational member/participants could have approached the conferences from a collectively centred place. The storytelling events demonstrated the collective centring function of shared storytelling; however, the participants missed the experience of being an organizational group being collectively centred as they engaged in organizational business.

Approaches to Collective Sense-making

Although Friendship International used several approaches to collective sense-making that can be identified from a constructivistic perspective,

members of this organization had no awareness of constructing shared meaning during shared storytelling or at any other time. The perspective of constructing shared meaning was contradictory to the understanding of reality (or belief system) in this organization. Collective sense-making did not 'make sense' inside this organization. The sense-making in the storytelling events came the closest to a communicative approach when the management group reflected together on touchstone stories and identified the elements necessary in a touchstone story. The participants shared individual experiences, compared these experiences, and expressed an understanding of what was shared between them.

A classic approach to sense-making emerged during the study. It was apparent in the stories of new ministries aligned with the founding vision and has already been presented.

A new aspect of collective sense-making came into play in this study. By either denial or rejection, the collective sense has been protected from change, amendment, or revision. With a surprising question, a staff member in the Southwest Region asked if I was saying 'collective censoring' during an interview, when I used the phrase, collective centering. She said, 'I thought you were saying censoring. And I thought that may be right.' (Interview 6, Speaker 1, lines 492-493). She observed that things that 'don't fit' are dismissed.

Unlike the four approaches to collective sense-making that had been proposed, the study uncovered a classic approach to sense-making and a communicative approach was displayed in the storytelling events.

Systemic Considerations for Collective Sense-Making

Early in this study, I envisioned the collective sense-making process in an open system to be influenced by the interaction of that which is internal and external to the system. This perception influenced my understanding of a collective sense as a shared understanding of reality and collective sense-making to see it more as the process of constructing this shared understanding of reality. A collective sense would be changed by the sense-making process when the members of a group had unexpected life experiences or when the external environment proved to be different from what group members had assumed it to be. What I observed in Friendship International was primarily about an unchanging truth rooted in a belief system, not one amended on the basis of the experience of the members. The collective sense-making process was pivoted around an established structure (truth) in the collective sense.

The analogy of a tetherball game helps to describe how collective sense-making seems to function in this organization. The shared storytelling is bounded internally by the pole of Judeo-Christian beliefs. The rope and tetherball are the collective sense that is connected to the permanent pole. Because the set-up between the pole and the rope and ball is permanent, each person who plays (or tells a story) experiences and

describes the reality in much the same way. The ball and the players go around and around in the same place. The ball is permanently connected to the pole, and both remain unchanged. It remains a predictable, unchanged game in spite of changes all around it. Friendship International was a system that continued to function, based upon its internal perceptions, in the face of external change and variation; FI was a structurally closed system.

Using autopoiesis as a model, five propositions were identified which described how collective sense-making can occur in a structurally closed system.

Proposition 1: In a closed system, there is no awareness or consciousness of collective sense-making. The shared meaning is predetermined, and mostly described, interpreted and deduced by the members. The members make a conscious choice, at some point, to align themselves with the predetermined shared meaning, and are, thereafter, essentially unaware of either the initial construction of the collective sense or of further sense-making.

Proposition 2: In a closed system, the collective sense evolves (is amended or altered) most easily by applying ideas that are logical extensions to ideas that are already shared. A logical extension is a common approach to the evolution of shared meaning. Two examples of a logical extension from the history of Friendship International were the extensions of the collective sense that the former president provided during his tenure. Following these extensions, one can observe that the collective sense has evolved over time. A discussion of each example follows.

In the first example, the former president proposed that because Christian volunteers share in the responsibility of the Great Commission, they have a role in the task of 'reaching international students for Christ'; hence, he launched the movement to involve and to train volunteers. The importance of volunteers to the growth of the work with students is also a conviction of the new president.

When the organizational members accepted the first extension of the collective sense, the way was paved for the next extension: to design ministries with international students in places outside the United States. It followed that, if 'reaching' international students is the task of Christians wherever international students are studying, Christians in every country needed to be targeting international students who are in their countries — hence, the former president launched FI organizations in Canada and England. Both of these ideas were logical extensions of ideas that were already present in the collective sense to a lesser degree.

Proposition 3: New ideas that express what is already embedded within the collective sense or logically extend the collective sense can readily be identified as a 'fit' for the organization. An idea that 'fits' is allowed to develop inside the collective sense without any need to marshal protective energies against the idea.

Proposition 4: Collective sense-making occurs differently in structurally closed systems than it does in open systems. First, in a closed system, the process, which approximates the dynamic approach to collective sense-making, does not include the pursuit and recognition of new facts that are used to update the collective sense. It is not really a dynamic process.

Second, in a closed system, there is a subtle difference between the evolutionary approach and the communicative approach to collective sense-making. Essentially, in the situations used as examples in the discussion of Proposition 2, the leader did the evolving, and the organizational members 'bought in'. Because it is a closed system, the organizational members only have the established collective sense as a reference.

Proposition 5: In a closed system, co-creating (the field approach to collective sense-making) is not expected. Collaboratively constructing a new sense of shared meaning is not only unexpected but undesirable.

A Unitary Reality

After examining Friendship International as a system, it became apparent that the organization could be described by the unitary reality in McWhinney's (1984) model of alternative realities. McWhinney's work provided a language for the experience of sense-making in FI.

Persons with a unitary reality maintain that there is one true belief system that is beyond questioning. No truth is gained from observations outside the belief system because truth is contained within the system, which is eternally true, and 'right in all its aspects' (1984: 15). McWhinney's (1984) work on the unitary reality recognized the tendency for unitaries to see themselves as a select group possessing a truth needed and or wanted by others. Possessors of truth can be zealous and persuasive in their propagation of truth. Persons with a unitary reality, like the members of FI, do not perceive themselves to have a socially constructed reality.

The unitary reality is sustained by a process of filtering out whatever is not recognized as truth; and, as long as a unitary believer can dismiss or deny anything that contradicts the truth, his/her understanding of reality is intact.

In spite of a unitary reality, there was a dissonance between the shared meaning of the organizational members and that of the president and this was apparent in the touchstone stories selected by the president and by the study participants.

The storytelling events with Friendship International demonstrated collective centring and stories of sense-making; however, this organization proved to be an unlikely organization in which to observe a co-creative approach to sense-making.

Follow-up

Two years from the time the study was conducted, all of mid- and upper-level managers and a third of the organizational members had left the organization and were continuing their work with international students under the auspices of other organizations. They were clear about the essence of this work — regardless of who held the presidency.

This experience served as a powerful illustration of meaning being possessed by organizational members, whether or not they possessed organizational power. This experience raised questions about how organizational meaning and purpose are most effectively shaped, and by whom they are shaped. The ultimate expression of organizational disagreement is to leave. In Friendship International, the members who left were those who no longer shared the collective sense or wanted to engage in the entire cycle of ministry that was identified in this study.

Discussion

Study Findings

The study with Friendship International demonstrated these findings:

1. Shared storytelling was a useful vehicle for collective centring and for confirming the collective sense in an organizational setting.
2. Story themes were indicators of the collective sense in the organization.
3. The belief system included in the collective sense of the organization complicated the exploration of collective sense-making in this study.
4. The stories of Tak and Mako expressed the entire cycle of ministry to which organizational members were committed; additionally, the story of Mako expressed three contradictions in the shared reality.
5. There was no conscious awareness of constructing shared meaning in the organization (in contrast to the athletic and ballet organizations in the preliminary study).
6. Friendship International was a structurally closed system. Collective sense-making in a structurally closed system involves confirming the shared meaning and slowly extending it in internally logical ways.
7. There was a collective effort (conscious or unconscious) to protect the shared meaning in the organization from change by filtering out anything that contradicted the collective sense.
8. In spite of the shared feeling that the vision remained unchanged, a diminishing of the founding vision had occurred and was demonstrated in the storytelling and interview transcripts. This occurred when organizational members focused on strategies (friendship evangelism,

discipling, and international students returning) included in the vision itself.

9. The president was shifting the focus of the ministry to volunteers at the time of the study. Organizational members had not accepted this shift and clearly described themselves as being engaged in the entire cycle of ministry to which the organization had been dedicated.

10. All three organizations studied (two in the preliminary study and the study with Friendship International), despite their distinctiveness, were organizationally flat, with strong leaders and substantial social control.

Study Findings and Initial Assumptions

While the study had been designed to facilitate direct observation of collective sense-making during shared storytelling, the shared storytelling largely demonstrated the collective sense rather than the process of constructing shared meaning. Stories were told that were examples of sense-making having occurred; however, I observed the construction of meaning only once during the management storytelling event. Another study is needed to demonstrate collective sense-making as a vehicle of shared storytelling.

Uses of Intentional Storytelling

There are five intentional uses of shared storytelling that warrant utilization by organizational members, managers and consultants. These are: (a) confirming the shared experiences and shared meaning of organizational members; (b) expressing the organizational experience of members or clients; (c) amending and altering the organizational reality; (d) developing, sharpening and renewing the sense of purpose held by organizational members; and (e) preparing a group for planning, implementing plans, and decision making in line with shared purposes.

Sense-making occurs when boards shape mission and managers forge goals and strategies for the organization and when organizational members make sense of their experiences in the organization. Clearly, the construction of shared meaning is not the sole domain of management. Those who work in and with organizations are well served by acknowledging that all organizational members are meaning-makers, by examining the collective sense (shared meaning) that exists across the organization, and by engaging all meaning-makers in conscious reflection on shared meaning.

Applicability, Contribution, and Future Research

Friendship International is similar to other non-profit and profit organizations in which employees share meaning and independently enact whole processes to accomplish organizational goals. The findings and

the method described in this study will be thought-provoking for organizational members, managers, leaders or consultants who work closely with groups rooted in shared meaning as a basis for action.

The contribution to the literature of organizational symbolism and organizational culture made by this study is the careful examination of one organization's stories, and the conceptual development and demonstration of collective centring and the collective sense in one organization. A desire to demonstrate a direct link between shared storytelling and the process of developing shared purpose fuelled the study; but, for this to be demonstrated, further research is needed.

There is much to learn about collective centring and collective sense-making in the interests of developing shared purpose. The image of conscious, centred construction of shared meaning by a large group of organizational members seems a long way off. This study has taken a step in that direction.

Note

1. The evangelical, Judeo-Christian belief system included: (a) God is creator, and loves the humanity he created; (b) the Bible is the wholly accurate, authoritative word of God; (c) Jesus Christ is the Son of God and belief in his death on the cross for the sins of the world is essential for entrance to heaven; (d) only those believing in Christ will enter heaven when they die. The unbelieving are doomed to hell; so, evangelism (winning converts) is important and necessary; (e) the Great Commission compels Christians to make disciples in every nation; (f) current divine involvement in the life of both Christians and non-Christians; (g) the importance and value of prayer; (h) a 'changed life' is the indicator of conversion or transformation; (i) the value of living a life of faithfulness, dedication, and sacrifice; (j) a readiness to meet human needs.

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