

# Pema's Tale: Intercultural Communication as Storytelling

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Article abstract

Intercultural communication is typically conceptualized in terms of business-oriented models that focus on the binary differences between cultural groups. Beginning with Edward Hall, the foundational premise is that the basis of effective communication with people of cultures other than our own is a thorough understanding of the disparities between cultural groups. This paper argues that intercultural communication should entail not merely the business-like, efficient exchange of information with different others but the crucial development of a feeling of connection and an appreciation for diverse ways of being in the world. Building upon the work of Jerome Bruner, it further suggests that the focus on dissimilarities which traditional models enforce obscures a true understanding of how intercultural communications can be enabled by a fundamental similarity: the human impulse to make sense of the world through narrative.



## **Pema's Tale: Intercultural Communication as Storytelling**

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Intercultural communication is typically conceptualized in terms of business-oriented models that focus on the binary differences between cultural groups. Beginning with Edward Hall, the foundational premise is that the basis of effective communication with people of cultures other than our own is a thorough understanding of the disparities between cultural groups. This paper argues that intercultural communication should entail not merely the business-like, efficient exchange of information with different others but the crucial development of a feeling of connection and an appreciation for diverse ways of being in the world. Building upon the work of Jerome Bruner, it further suggests that the focus on dissimilarities which traditional models enforce obscures a true understanding of how intercultural communications can be enabled by a fundamental similarity: the human impulse to make sense of the world through narrative.

As new media extend our reach around the globe, new challenges and questions arise. For many of our neighbours to the south, the rise of a global communications network has heightened concerns for safety and the protection of democratic rights. In Canada—described by John Ralston Saul (2008) as “a métis civilization,” best represented as “an inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us” (p. 4)—the concern tends to be with finding ways to bridge the non-geographical distances between peoples who are increasingly brought into conjunction with each other. How can we forge meaningful connections with individuals whose values, practices, and systems of belief we may not understand? I believe that the answer, perhaps a characteristically Canadian answer, lies in the ability of narrative to reach across cultures.

Therefore, my purpose in this paper is to propose a reconceptualization of intercultural communication as storytelling. In the first section of this paper, I discuss the difficulties inherent in the prevailing tendency to conceptualize intercultural communication in terms of the differences between cultural groups. In the second section, I elaborate on what the “narrative gift,” the

human impulse to tell stories, can bring to an understanding of the meaning and nature of intercultural communication.

### The Problem with Difference

I will begin with a story about “Pema” (a pseudonym), my driver and guide during a recent visit to the small Himalayan nation of Bhutan. Now in his early thirties, Pema, like many Bhutanese boys from poor farming families, was brought up and educated in a monastery, with the thought that he would become a Buddhist monk. But unlike most of the other young men who don the crimson robes of monkhood, Pema made the difficult decision, at the age of nineteen or twenty, to leave the monastery. Perhaps he left for love, because shortly afterwards he married, and he and his wife had three children in fairly short order. When the children were still very young, his wife was granted permission to go to New York City to do a one-year Masters degree. This was a wonderful opportunity for her and for the whole family, because Bhutanese people with graduate degrees are guaranteed good jobs with the government. But her one year in New York stretched into two and then three, until it was clear that, dazzled by the bright lights and affluence, Pema’s wife would not return. As a devout Buddhist who does *puja* at an altar in his home every morning, Pema may see some karmic justice in this situation. Since Buddhism avers that there is no such thing as random, causeless suffering, Pema perhaps perceives an interdependence between his fateful decision to leave the monastery and his wife’s decision to leave her family and country. But he does not seem unhappy. Spending his days caring for his three children and driving tourists like myself around the country, he almost always wears a peaceful smile on his face and laughs easily.

Pema and I constructed this story together during the three weeks that he drove me along the narrow, winding roads of Bhutan. Our conversation was not easy. Pema speaks a very broken English and my Dzongkha is even more severely limited to *kuzuzangpo* (hello) and *kadrinche* (thank you). At first, as Pema tried to tell me about the temples, *dzonghs* (monastery fortresses), and *chortens* (Buddhist monuments) that we passed in our travels, the language barrier seemed insurmountable: I usually had to turn to my Lonely Planet guidebook for understandable information. But as Pema began to speak about himself rather than about landmarks, I found myself paying greater attention, asking questions, and making an effort to piece together the fragments he imparted into a coherent whole. Over time, we forged a communication based not on information exchange but on our shared construction of the remarkable story of his life. And, somehow, “story” was a language we both spoke.

Few of the theories that traditionally inform the scholarship of intercultural communication can explain the nature of my communication with Pema, because most of them are business-oriented models that focus on the

*differences* between cultural groups (Kiesling & Paulston, 2005, p. 249). Consider the influential work of Edward Hall, considered to be the founder of the field of intercultural communication (Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002, p. 3). Hall begins from the premise that the basis of effective communication with people of cultures other than our own is a thorough understanding of the disparities between cultural groups. Other influential voices in this field, such as Gert Hofstede (1984), and Fons Trompenaars (1998), also adhere to this premise, varying only in the dimensions of cultural variability that they identify. Thus, these theorists would characterize my communications with Pema in terms of the gulfs of understanding between us: I come from a “low-context” culture—“highly individualized, somewhat alienated, fragmented”—while Pema’s is a “high-context” culture,” in which information is widely shared” and “simple messages with deep meaning flow freely” (Hall, 1977, p. 39); I come from a culture with a high level of risk avoidance, while Pema’s culture is more tolerant of uncertainty (Hofstede, 1984); and I am a universalist, valuing rules, while Pema is a particularist, according a higher value to relationships (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). (Ironically, none of these theorists identifies dualistic thinking as a peculiarly Western way of conceptualizing the world.)

Are these kinds of black-and-white points of difference helpful in explaining the nature of my communication with Pema? I believe not, for several reasons. First, it seems to me unlikely that an emphasis on the fundamental differences between Us and Them—a kind of thinking that is at the heart of most conflict—can form the basis for meaningful communication. There is, secondly, the rather serious objection to be made that such labels are essentializing and may not accurately represent either myself, Pema, or—because cultures are organic, not fixed—the cultures in which we live.

The third limitation of these business-oriented models is that they are based on a conception of intercultural communication as information processing and transmission. This is quite explicit in the case of Hall, who contends that “information underlies virtually everything” (Hall & Hall, 1987, p. 5), even highly contextualized discussions about particular places and people, because context is just “the information that surrounds an event and is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event” (p. 7). Information transmission is one dictionary definition of communication, but it is, to my mind, an impoverished basis for conceptualizing what it means to communicate with someone from another culture. As globalization increasingly thrusts us into proximity with those from other cultures, we should look to intercultural communication to provide not merely the business-like, efficient exchange of information with different Others but also the crucial development of a feeling of connection and an appreciation for diverse ways of being in the world. These, I believe, are the important ends that storytelling can achieve, because it is based not upon the information transmission model but upon what James

Carey (1988) calls the ritual view of communication, which “draws persons together in fellowship and commonality. . . . It sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action” (pp. 18-19).

Which leads me to the fourth and final limitation of theorizing intercultural communication in terms of differences. The focus on dissimilarities which these models enforce obscures a true understanding of how intercultural communications, such as that between myself and Pema, can be enabled by a fundamental similarity: the human impulse to make sense of the world through storytelling.

### **The Narrative Gift**

What do I mean by storytelling? Simply defined, a story is a narrated sequence of related events, real or imagined; and storytelling is the form of communication that springs from the seemingly innate human need to construct and share these dramatic sequences in order to make meaning of the world and our place in it.

In saying that storytelling is a natural human impulse, I am drawing primarily upon the work of Jerome Bruner, who asserts, as a starting point, that this “narrative gift” (2002, p. 85) is profoundly intercultural, a predisposition that all people, in all cultures, develop from an early age: “We are so adept at narrative that it seems almost as natural as language itself” (2002, p. 3). So irresistible is the narrative impulse as a way of making sense of the world that Bruner (1996) speculates it may actually be genetically encoded (p. 39). However, Bruner is not alone in his assertions about the universality of narrative. For example, anthropologist Clifford Geertz observes that, in our species, “The drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order, is evidently as real and as pressing as the more familiar biological needs” (quoted in Fulford, 1999, p. 15); and Roland Barthes (1982) concurs that “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. . . . narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (pp. 251-252).

Stories may be entertaining, educational, or cautionary, but Bruner (2002) also stresses their very important socializing and acculturating role. Story, he insists,

is a precondition for our collective life in culture. I doubt such collective life would be possible were it not for our human capacity to organize and communicate experience in a narrative form. For it is the

conventionalization of narrative that converts individual experience into collective coin which can be circulated, as it were, on a base wider than a merely interpersonal one. Being able to read another's mind need depend no longer on sharing some narrow ecological or interpersonal niche but, rather, on a common fund of myth, folktale, "common sense." (p. 16)

In Bruner's view, then, a shared narrative pool is a source of mutual understanding. But he goes further: if stories serve as a kind of cultural glue, it is not simply because they provide us with a set of norms to which we can all agree and aspire. More importantly, stories also help us to understand and accept exceptionality by rendering "deviations from the ordinary in a comprehensible form" (1990, p. 47). And that is why most good stories are, in fact, about exceptionalities and deviations: as we engage with tales about women flouting social mores, or men who stand above the crowd, or angst-filled teenagers who simply do not fit in, we will generally find a way to come to terms with behavior that infringes upon what is deemed to be normal, either by explaining events in ways that are meaningful to us or by enlarging the bounds of the ordinary, the conventional. Bruner (1990) contends that cultures can only exist insofar as they have this extended capacity "for resolving conflicts, for explicating differences and renegotiating communal meanings"; and these processes, so "essential to the conduct of a culture," are achieved through narrative (p. 47).

Bruner's assertions about the functions of narrative are intra-cultural; that is, he is primarily concerned with how stories provide cohesion *within* a culture by eliding diversity. I believe, however, that his hypothesis can be usefully extended. If we accept Bruner's (1990) contention that "one of the principal forms of peacekeeping is the human gift for presenting, dramatizing, and explicating the mitigating circumstances surrounding conflict-threatening breaches in the ordinariness of life" (p. 95), then it seems reasonable to suggest that the ancient art of storytelling might also serve a similar function in relations between people of different cultures, as we share narratives that dramatically illustrate the bases of our common humanity. In fact, I will go further and assert that it is primarily in narrative mode that effective cross-cultural communication takes place. For, unlike information—which is by definition "context-free" (Postman, 1992, p. 67), disconnected from the life world—stories create in their audience an instant engagement with the lives of the individuals whose experiences they depict, and a deep appreciation for the circumstances and conditions in which they live. As Peter Herschok (1999) puts it, narrative is "a path of nondiscrimination—a mode of world-making conducive to realizing uniquely dramatic interdependence" (p. 237). David Geoffrey Smith (1999) agrees that "human beings find their deepest companionship in the action of telling stories to each other" (p. 75):

The opening of the self to the non-self involves primarily an opening of our stories to each other, an acceptance of how we are always everywhere already living in the midst of stories, involving a surfacing and a sharing of that which constitutes us. This is difficult, but it provides the necessary means by which we can see one another in each other in a deep way—to get beyond pure difference to creative relation and the possibility of true care. (p. 99)

Consider, for example, my association with Pema. When we were first introduced, I wondered what I, a Canadian academic, might have to say to this young man, so exotic in his *gho*, the traditional garb of Bhutanese men. But by the end of our time together, he was no longer a “foreigner,” but simply another human being whose story—about the struggles of youth to control its destiny; about love, marriage, and family; and about the things we do to cope day-to-day when life takes unexpected turns—bore clear connections to my own.

Although I refer to it as Pema’s tale, the story that arose between us is, in the strictest sense, neither entirely Pema’s nor mine. As Bruner (1990) asserts, “Obviously, ‘the-story-of-a-life’ as told to a particular person is in some deep sense a joint product of the teller and the told” (p. 124). This notion of narrative co-construction is vital: I am not suggesting merely that we reconceptualize intercultural communication as storytelling but, more particularly, that we regard it as a collaborative construction of meaning by individuals who are trying to forge an empathetic connection. Here is how Natalie Oman (2004) puts it:

Surely intercultural understanding is something that is created *with* specific other people, at its most fundamental level. If the understanding that I attain is to be contextualized and sensitive to the implications of power inequalities between myself and those I seek to build understanding with, it must be dialogical. Such an approach cannot be about speaking for, but must aggressively emphasize the importance of speaking with. . . . In this way, the form of recognition imparted to the other begins to be less a recognition of how she is like [or different from] me and more a recognition of her in terms she might employ to describe herself. (pp. 79-80)

Thus, Pema’s tale was neither his nor mine, and could only exist through our association—the association between two specific individuals. As Pema shared fragments of his life story with me, I rolled them around, parsed them in terms I understood, and returned them to him rearticulated: “So you’re saying that you used to be a Buddhist monk?” Pema would agree, disagree, amend, or offer a silence that also spoke, and the process would continue. The resulting story might bear little resemblance to the historical truth (if such a

thing can be said to have an existence apart from the multiple subjectivities of which it is comprised), but it possessed a more important “narrative truth” (Bruner, 1990, p. 111), in that the reconstruction was perceived by both parties as having adequately captured a vital essence we both understood.

I can anticipate three objections that might be made to my suggestion that we reconceptualize intercultural communication as collaborative storytelling. The first is that language differences will necessarily diminish possibilities for the intercultural co-construction of narratives. Of course, it is obvious that some level of shared linguistic understanding is desirable, but I am not entirely convinced that it is absolutely necessary. I can attest from experience that it is not a sufficient condition for the attainment of a sense of connection and empathy. Three years before my visit to Bhutan, I spent five weeks in India. Many people in India, and most of those with whom I associated, spoke English fluently, but I found all of my attempts at communication to be halting and ineffectual, nor could I make sense of the Indian people and their culture. For whatever reason, I was unable to extrapolate stories from the profusion of voices that I came to think of derogatorily as “babble.” Babble, as Chamberlin (2004) rightly observes, is “one of the ways we divide the world into Them and Us. . . . There are those who speak properly, . . . like Us; and those who babble, more or less meaninglessly, as They do” (p. 8). Frustrated by my failure to establish a narrative connection, I had erected further barriers to intercultural communication and understanding.

Chamberlin (2004) also provides an example of the converse—of meaningful intercultural communication taking place in the absence of a shared language. He describes a meeting between members of a northern British Columbia native community and officials, who were claiming the land for their government. In expressing his astonishment at the claim, one of the elders lapsed into his language, Gitksan, and began to tell a story:

All of a sudden everyone understood...even though the government foresters didn't know a word of Gitksan, and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important; how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart. (Chamberlin, 2004, p. 1)

Storytelling transcends linguistic barriers because it is a cultural practice; its meaning is only partly dialogic. The tone of voice, the movement of hands and body, the expression on the face of the speaker—all of these are vital parts of the story. The government officials did not need to know the language of the



native people to understand that a story was being told and that the story was about the connection of a people to their place.

In fact, far from perceiving the lack of a shared language as an obstacle, I see it as a rationale for the reconceptualization of intercultural communication in narrative terms. As Oman (2004) explains,

the dialogical method must extend beyond dialogue itself to participation in other-cultural practices. Dialogue alone cannot be the sole means of communicating the standards of value of one culture to members of another, because the language of each cultural group initially limits the concepts that can be conveyed. Because the broader “cultural codes” of which languages are a part open up the possibility of experiences that may not be easily communicable to others whose languages lack concepts to express those experiences, a serious effort to achieve intercultural understanding requires a greater commitment, at least by some members of the groups involved, than is involved in simple dialogue. (p. 80)

Storytelling is one such “other-cultural” practice whose grammar transcends the dialogic and thus enhances the possibilities for true communication even in the absence of a shared linguistic understanding.

The second objection that I might anticipate to my suggestion that we reconceptualize intercultural communication as collaborative storytelling is that story can only ever allow us a partial insight into another culture. As E.M. Bruner (1986) points out, there are large gaps between reality and experience (how that reality is interpreted by an individual), and between experience and expression (how that experience is framed and articulated to others). Cultural differences between sender and receiver create yet another gap, such that, when we share narratives with individuals from other cultures, the most we can hope to achieve is “our stories about their stories; we are interpreting the people as they are interpreting themselves” (p. 10). There is no denying that, even when a storyteller spins a thread of connection with someone from another culture, that narrative thread is always fragile, always partial, because of the inevitable lacunas of understanding that make some of the deep meaning of the story, its cultural particularity, inaccessible to the outsider. But as I discovered in my communications with Pema, understanding between two people, in the sense of a sympathetic connection, is not dependent upon total comprehension. Total comprehension of another culture, on the other hand, *is* dependent upon first establishing that sympathetic sense of connection.

Finally, an objection might be raised on the basis of narrative’s imperialist function: history shows that destroying a culture’s binding stories and replacing them with those of the conqueror is an important part of the process by which one culture attains dominion over another. Edward Said

(1978) elaborates this theme, describing how writers of both fiction and non-fiction participated in a “discourse of power originating in an era of colonialism” (p. 345) by constructing narratives that intellectually and imaginatively imparted upon the East the identity of being backward, exotic, sensual, passive, and a natural “appendage to Europe” (p. 86). According to this view, in telling Pema’s story, I am appropriating his experience, recast for my own purposes and within my own Canadian frame of reference, and denying him voice and power. This kind of thinking leads us inevitably back to the preoccupation with difference that underlies the theories of Hall, Hofstede, and Trompenaars. Reanimated by post-colonial and poststructural thinking, the soulless binaries of Us and Them are now caught in unending cycles of power and resistance. Bruner (1996) addresses this objection incisively:

Nobody needs to “go to war” over the multiple meanings, multiple perspectives, multiple frames that can be used in understanding the human Past, Present, and Possible. Collaborative narrative construal is not a zero-sum game. Making sense jointly need not be *hegemony*, just shoving the story version of the stronger down the throats of the weaker—even when tense political issues are at stake. (p. 96)

It is important to keep in mind that Pema also came away from our encounter with “Ellen’s Tale”—the story of a Canadian woman choosing to live her life in a way that is very different from what most Bhutanese would deem ordinary. Therefore, telling stories with, not for, others is, in Bruner’s (1996) terms, a “process of fair minded joint construal” whose objective “is to achieve not unanimity, but more consciousness. And more consciousness always implies more diversity” (p. 97). Simply put, the more stories we tell, together, from a variety of perspectives, the more we will enrich our understanding of the human condition, our sense of the possible, and our acceptance of the many diverse ways of being in the world. And this, of course, is the essence of intercultural understanding.

I have suggested in this paper that we consider reframing our understanding of intercultural communication not as the elucidation and overcoming of difference but as the co-construction of narrative. I suspect that there is something distinctively Canadian about this urge to create and share rich, compelling stories that will help to build understanding and a sense of connection between people. As a “borderline case” (McLuhan, 1977), existing in the space between many psychic, social, and geographic powers, Canada often plays a mediating role on the global stage. “We are loathe to be drawn in,” writes Saul (2008). “We would rather talk and negotiate” (p. 89). Narrative is a particular kind of talk whose power is such that it enables us to articulate simultaneously both the roots of our diversity and the common denominators of our human experience. As Bruner (2002) observes, stories “are so particular, so

local, so unique—yet have such reach. They are metaphors writ large: their loft is like the loft of myth” (Bruner, 2002, p. 35).

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