

The Enchanted Imagination: Storytelling's Power to Entrance Listeners

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Consciousness has been described as both a variety of discrete states and a constantly changing flow. Charles T. Tart has developed a systems approach to consciousness in which he describes a baseline state of "normal," waking consciousness and multiple altered states induced by a disruption of that baseline. This concept of a system of interrelated components is applicable to the altered state of consciousness associated with listening to a story: the "storylistening trance." This research was designed to be exploratory and to elicit information concerning the characteristics of the storylistening trance and any influences (positive or negative) that affect it. The methodology was naturalistic, combining interviews and participant observation. The results show that many listeners do experience a qualitatively different state while listening to some stories. The article addresses characteristics of this trance state and influences upon it, and it concludes with a theoretical model of the storylistening trance and the applicability of the findings to library media specialists.

from "The Legend of the Destruction of Kash"

"Far-li-mas, today the day has arrived when you must cheer me. Tell me a story." "The performance is quicker than the command," said Far-li-mas, and began. The king and his guests forgot to drink, forgot to breathe. The slaves forgot to serve. They, too, forgot to breathe. For the art of Far-li-mas was like hashish, and, when he had ended, all were as though enveloped in a delightful swoon. The king had forgotten his thoughts of death. Nor had any realized that they were being held from twilight until dawn; but when the guests departed they found the sun in the sky. (Campbell 1969, 153-54) *from "What Happens When You Really Listen"*

On that day, the reciter was enchanting the audience with the story of Hanuman the monkey and how he had to leap across the ocean to take Rama's signet ring to Sita, the abducted wife of Rama. When Hanuman was making his leap, the signet ring slipped from his hand and fell into the ocean. Hanuman didn't know what to do. He had to get the ring back quickly and take it to Sita in the demon's kingdom. While he was wringing his hands, the husband, who was listening with rapt attention in the first row, said, "Hanuman, don't worry. I'll get it for you." Then he jumped up and dived into the ocean, found the ring in the ocean floor, and brought it back and gave it to Hanuman. (Ramanujan 1991, 56)

Statement of the Problem

Storytelling has enjoyed a renaissance in the past twenty years. Books on how to select, prepare, and present stories fill bookstore shelves, and “professional” storytellers make careers of performing stories at festivals, libraries, schools, and conferences throughout the nation. The leading national journal of storytelling, *Storytelling Magazine*, is filled with opinion pieces, but while storytelling has flourished, there has not been a concomitant surge in research of the art form. One element of storytelling has remained nearly unconsidered, and it is, perhaps, the most profound and influential characteristic of storytelling: its power to entrance those who listen. As the excerpts from the stories above show, people who listen to stories can undergo a profound change in their experience of reality. The normal, waking state of consciousness changes as the story takes on a new dimension; listeners seem to experience the story with remarkable immediacy, engaging in the story’s plot and with the story’s characters, and they may enter an altered state of consciousness: a “storylistening trance.” What is this phenomenon, and what does the listener experience during this altered state? Is it qualitatively different from one’s normal state of consciousness and in what ways? What influences one’s ability to experience this altered state? Of what import is this altered state to library media specialists? These are the questions that this article addresses as I build a phenomenologically rich description of the listener’s experience of the entrancing power of storytelling.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is influenced by the theoretical principles of multiple disciplines, including psychology, cognitive science, literary philosophy, communication, folklore, rhetorical studies, linguistics, medicine, counseling, hypnosis, and religious studies. The principal elements, however, can be traced to the theories of reader’s response criticism, consciousness and its states, and systems theory.

Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 12), a prominent reader’s response theoretician, discusses the need in literary philosophy and literary criticism to study the impact of a text on its reader. She draws a useful distinction between a “text” and a “poem,” claiming that the text is that which the author creates, while the true poem is that which the reader creates, using the text as the foundation and adding to it personal associations, experiences, images, memories, expectations, perceptions, and the like. “The poem [is] the experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of the text.” This concept is applicable to the storytelling event. The storyteller recounts the “text,” while the listeners create the true “story” based on the verbal text and overlaid with personal images and memories. While there is a continual feedback loop present in any storytelling event—as the teller changes the story to accommodate the audience—the unit of study, following Rosenblatt’s thesis, is not the storyteller’s performance but the listener’s experience.

Research of consciousness has taken diverse perspectives. “Structuralists” have concentrated on describing the elements of consciousness, the discrete units that may compose it (Battista 1978; Marsh 1977; Csikszentmihalyi 1990). “Functionalists” have emphasized the significance of psychological processes to the ongoing development of the individual and his or her role in society (Stephen 1979), while “behaviorists” claim either that consciousness should not be the focus of psychological inquiry at all since it is not an external, perceptible behavior (Watson 1913), or that it should be linked to physiological events (Boring 1963). Finally, the

“constructivist” notion that organisms construct the universe in which they live based on cultural, environmental, and personal perceptions has reinvigorated the study of consciousness.

The current study rests squarely within the framework of this latest concept of consciousness, although there is evidence of each of these trends. If people construct their realities, then to understand their experience of the world, one must explore with them their perceptions, expectations, and personal constructs. Interviews, the principal methodological approach for this study, must focus on obtaining precisely this information. I emulate the structuralists when I define some of the elements that comprise the storylistening trance experience, group them into categories, and explore the system behind the flow of this experience. The methodology also draws from the behaviorists’ idea of perceptible behavior as I engaged in participant observation, though I do not ascribe to their indifference toward consciousness itself. The functionalists’ approach is perhaps the least represented in this study, for I made no determined effort to discover the utility of this altered state of consciousness.

Systems theory, and holistic thinking in general, has become popular in the last thirty years, and it is being productively applied to many areas of research. It arose as a reaction to the mechanistic paradigm (the dominant paradigm based in seventeenth-century physics) that views nature as inert, truth as value-free, cause and effect as basically linear, and consciousness as epiphenomenal, a mere reflection of neural processes in the brain (Berman 1996). Systems theorists, on the other hand, view nature as an “organism” (Lovelock’s 1979 “*gaia* hypothesis”), a system of interacting elements, the sum of which is greater than the parts. They believe that truth is value-laden, cause and effect are interactive, and consciousness is constructed and more than a simple reflection of neural energy.

Charles T. Tart has developed a systems approach to states of consciousness. “While the components of consciousness can be studied in isolation, they exist as parts of a complex system, consciousness, and can be fully understood only when we see this function in the overall system” (Tart 1975, 3). He posits the existence of a basic awareness in all humans, which, when it comes under volitional control, is called “attention.” He also claims that certain “structures” exist which are “relatively permanent structures/functions/subsystems of the mind/brain that act on information to transform it in various ways” (Tart 1975, 4). One’s *discrete state of consciousness* (d-SoC), the “unique, dynamic pattern or configuration of psychological structures,” (Tart 1975, 5) can be considered the system of psychological structures that have been activated by attention/awareness, and that are interacting at any particular time. The d-SoC to which most people are accustomed is the one in which they spend the majority of their waking lives. This can be considered the *baseline state of consciousness* (b-SoC), and any major deviation from this baseline is considered a *discrete altered state of consciousness* (d-ASC). When something happens to destabilize the baseline, consciousness proceeds through a transitional period in which the psychological structures of consciousness are reshuffled, and an altered state may result.

Methodology

For this study, I attended eight different professional storytelling events in the midwestern United States during the period of January 1997 through September 1997. Because the context of an event can influence one’s state of consciousness, and because some altered states of consciousness are accompanied by obvious physiological manifestations (Lankton & Lankton

1986; Rosen 1982), I engaged in participant observation of these storytelling events. I looked for, but did not limit myself to:

1. Physiological indications of a d-ASC
2. Noteworthy elements of the telling and the teller (i.e., rhythm, pacing, facial expressions, etc.)
3. Elements of the environment (i.e., climate control, noise, distractions, etc.)
4. Story content and style

There is, of course, a subjective filter for all of this information, as I attend to things that seem important to me and miss things that might appear important to others, but this is the case for all individual research. I used this observation to select participants to interview immediately after the storytelling to decrease the memory decay due to passing time (Thompson 1982), to keep memory as unconsidered as possible (Ericsson and Simon 1980), and to keep the context of memory retrieval similar to the context of memory encoding that aids in recall (Begg and White 1982). I approached listeners who seemed interested in the storytelling (i.e., they seemed to be paying attention) but who did not necessarily show precise physiological evidence of a d-ASC; this helped broaden the descriptive base of the study, and it provided information on what hinders entry into this trance state.

After individuals agreed to participate in the study, they were given a consent form describing the nature of their involvement and their control of the information to be included. I asked each person to complete a personal profile as well to gather basic information. To get a variety of experiential data, I interviewed people ranging in age from childhood (at least eight years old) to the elderly; no attempt was made to use age as a variable because the focus of this study was on one holistic picture, not on individual or group differences. I conducted a total of twenty-two, semi-structured interviews. Each interview was audiotape recorded, transcribed, sent to the participant for review, and finally coded for emergent categories.

While the actual questions I posed to each participant emerged from the conversation and from their use of particular words and phrases, I did enter each interview with general questions with which to frame the discussion. Examples of these questions are:

1. Did you have a favorite story of the ones you just heard? What did you like about it and why?
2. Did it make you feel any particular way?
3. Were you doing anything (in your mind) while listening to the story?
4. Is there a particular storyteller or storytelling style that appeals to you more than others? Why? How would you characterize this style?
5. Did you notice anything going on around you while you were listening?
6. How long did the story seem to last?
7. When you are having the experience of [substitute participant's words here; for example, "being transfixed," or "being transported"], can you describe how it felt? What is it that helps this happen? Is there more than one thing?

I used the following methods described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990) to establish the trustworthiness of this study: triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and audit trail. I employed triangulation on several levels: multiple methods of data collection

(“methods triangulation”), multiple sources of information (“source triangulation”), and multiple theoretical perspectives (“theory/perspective triangulation”). Peer debriefing—sometimes called “analyst triangulation” in which more than one person reviews the data and the findings to see if categories found by the researcher are indeed evident—was accomplished by getting feedback from two experienced storytellers who were interested in the process. They were asked to read one of the transcribed interviews, note anything that seemed pertinent to my research topic, and explain in what way they felt it related. I then gave them a copy of my coded transcription and asked them to note any place that they felt I was misinterpreting data or finding relevance where they felt there was none. The storytellers did not find any new items of relevance, leading me to believe that my analysis was thorough, and their review of my coded transcripts yielded no sense for either of them that I was misguided in my analysis.

After transcribing each interview, I sent it to the participant for member checking, “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 314). Participants were asked to review their interviews and change, delete, or add anything they felt necessary to make the transcription a more accurate account of their experience. I asked that they change as little as possible to preserve the immediacy of their recall, but that anything could be altered if they felt it necessary. None of the participants changed information on the transcripts, though two did add information to their record: one to clarify a point, and one to add a new idea.

The audit trail is the written record of the unfolding research. It included field notes taken during observation, coding strategies of emergent categories, and personal insights about the research process that affected the interview questions or conclusions I was drawing.

I bring certain perspectives to this research. One of the premises upon which naturalistic inquiry rests is that purely objective research is impossible. All researchers have an impact on their studies, and the intent is not to attempt to remove this perspective mechanically and artificially, but to acknowledge it so that others may understand the particular perspective of the researcher. I am a storyteller who has seen listeners enter the storylistening trance, and I am also an avid storylistener who has had the experience. I am convinced that this d-ASC exists, that it is worth studying, and that the entrancing power of the event has as much to do with the listener as with the performance. I used this introspective knowledge as a springboard to interpretation, while trying to limit its potential to make me prejudge the data.

Results

My analysis of the interviews and participant-observation data indicates that people often experience a qualitatively different state of consciousness while listening to stories. There seem to be three phases of involvement in a story that are reminiscent of Langer’s (1990) stances in the process of interpreting literature. She mentions four stances: being out and stepping in; being in and moving through; being in and stepping out; and stepping out and objectifying the experience. This final stance involves the way in which the reader uses the information, and this study does not address that issue. The preceding three, however, are similar to the process undergone by those who experience the storylistening trance. The participants’ comments address the process of moving toward the experience, being in it, and moving away from it.

Several of the participants described the process of moving toward involvement in the story with action words such as “falling” or “slipping” or “being transported.” Some listeners do not have

such a dramatic feeling of motion, though there remains an undercurrent of movement. One listener said that it was “the manner of telling that *brought it to the point* that you felt like you were really there.”

Once the listeners passed this initial phase, many experienced a profound shift into an altered state of consciousness. Nineteen of the twenty-two participants mentioned something akin to this phenomenon, and the remaining three may have had the experience but simply did not mention it during the interviews. Participants’ descriptions of this experience were varied though rarely unique. They used phrases like “went with the flow,” “was absorbed,” “in sync with the experience,” “that magic circle that’s cast around,” and “transfixed in listening to the story.” From the poetic idea of a “magic circle” to the quasi-Csikszentmihalyian perception of “flow,” these listeners describe the experience of being entranced by a story; however, it does not seem to be either a total immersion or a complete lack thereof, for several of the participants spoke of *levels* of involvement. One participant said, “it’s different parts of me that get awakened by each of the people,” referring to her appreciation of artistic technique, her identification with the storyteller, her love of particular stories, and her appreciation of the storyteller’s involvement in his or her story. When she was “totally in the story,” however, she was “caught on all levels.”

Characteristics of the Storylistening Trance

Six categories emerged from the listeners’ descriptions of the storylistening trance phenomenon:

1. Realism: the sense that the story environment or characters are real or alive
2. Lack of awareness: of surroundings or other mental processes
3. Engaged receptive channels:
 - visual (both physical watching and mental visualization)
 - auditory (both physical hearing and mental “chatter”)
 - kinesthetic
 - emotional
4. Control: of the experience by the listener, or someone or something else
5. “Placeness”: the sense that the listener “goes somewhere” (often “into”) another space
6. Time distortion: the sense that subjective time moves at a different speed than objective, clock time

Realism

One aspect of the storylistening trance is that some listeners experience it as very real. Eight participants mentioned this perception in some manner. Some of the participants actually used the word “real” to describe this perception: “it’s not flat [like TV], it’s real.” Others used the word “alive” to express this concept: “it brought it alive,” stories “come alive when you relate to them specifically,” and “it’s the actual living of the images.” Still others described this experience with the terms “being there” and “in the story,” implying that the story’s action and characters figuratively surrounded the listener.

An interesting distinction was drawn by several of the participants: some of them merely watched the story unfold around them while others felt they participated in the developing plot. For example, one listener said, “It’s like I’m standing here watching, I’m not really part of it, I’m just watching the whole thing.” On the other hand, a different listener claimed, “I’m no longer

sitting in a tent listening to someone tell a story . . . I was in those woods, I saw those animals, they were real.” A third participant mentioned a possible reason for this distinction. He felt that, “With a really good story, you can just be there and be involved, either as a fly on the wall or as a participant, depending on whether you were in that action in the past.” His reason for participation in the story was unique among the participants: that total absorption in a story depends on a similar past experience in the life of the listener, such that there is, perhaps, a fusion of experience and story that dramatically increases one’s involvement.

A similar distinction was evident in the relation of the listeners to the characters in the story; sometimes they merely identified with the characters and the emotions they felt, while occasionally the listeners felt they *became* the characters in the story. One listener described her identification with the characters as, “I certainly had an empathy with the characters [and] I could really feel the fear and anxiety of those children.” Another listener took on the role of the story character, saying, “I felt like that little girl again . . . because I could see myself in church squirming.” She continued, “Instead of seeing her [the storyteller] in her church pew, I saw me in the church pew . . . that was *me* on that church pew,” and she concluded, “You suddenly *are* the person that’s alive in that story.”

Lack of Awareness of Surroundings

Coupled with the sense of the pervasive reality of the story world is a simultaneous decrease in awareness of everything else. Seventeen of the participants agreed that, in general, they did not notice things going on around them while they listened to stories. If they did mention such awareness, it was usually accompanied by a negative comment, implying that they did not want to notice things other than the story.

Participants’ comments concerning this lack of awareness showed three different perceptions of the issue. The first (mentioned by eleven participants) described the sense that the surroundings remained constant and the listener “forgot” to attend to them, simply “didn’t notice” them, or consciously “tuned them out.” “I kind of forget all my surroundings,” and “I can completely forget about everything else except the story,” were expressions common to this group. The second (mentioned by three participants) described the perception that the surroundings disappeared; for example, one participant said, “Everything else around you just blacks out,” while another remarked, “It’s like nothing else is happening, like nothing else is going on anywhere.” The third perception (mentioned by only one participant) was that the listener left the surroundings, as seen in the remark, “I just kind of fall into a different world.”

Engaged Receptive Channels

Many communicative channels are engaged when a person listens to a story. On an external level, the visual channel is stimulated as the storyteller gesticulates and creates facial expressions; the auditory channel engages to process the words spoken by the storyteller; and, occasionally, the kinesthetic channel becomes active if the teller touches a listener or if the vibrations from a speaker or from the floor can be felt by the listener. Internally, mental visualizations are stimulated as the listener creates images to match the descriptions of the storyteller; the emotions are activated in response to character emotions, the teller’s tones of voice, or plot elements; and there are kinesthetic responses to the story in the form of shivers, moans, and sighs.

Visual

Nineteen of the respondents referred to the visual nature of the experience of storylistening, concentrating on the visualization process. One listener commented that “it was very, very visual,” and another said, “It was so powerfully presented and evoked so many images . . . [that] it’s like watching a movie or a play.” One woman said, “Being captivated for me is seeing the movie going on, pictures in my head; it’s not storytelling if you’re not seeing a movie in front of your face.” One participant made no mention during the interview of whether or not she visualized the story.

Only two of the participants claimed that they did not visualize at all while listening to a story. One, a retired man of sixty, claimed, “I don’t see any pictures; I listen to the words.” His experience of storylistening was linked to the various styles of presentation, the best of which was “slow” because it “just kind of gathered you in” which he found “soothing.” The other was an eight-year-old girl who said that when “somebody’s telling stories, and I know a story similar to it, I feel like I’m telling them because I’ve heard them before, or I know them pretty well.” “I’m sort of telling it to myself,” she continued, “I’m not really seeing anything.”

Auditory

The two participants mentioned above who did not visualize stories, focused on the auditory channel of the storylistening process. Two other participants mentioned the power of this channel. One said, “I can just hear her voice on tape, and I can be transported,” while a second participant, when asked what got her involved in stories, claimed, “It’s very much the sound.”

Kinesthetic

While the most often mentioned involvement in stories was visualizing the tale, twelve participants mentioned that they also reacted kinesthetically (“there are physical changes that happen while you’re listening” or “I had physiological responses to it”) to the story. These reactions ranged from mimicry of the character’s gross motor actions (“when I heard her say what the person [story character] was doing, sometimes I’ll make a move like what he’s doing”) to internal physiological changes in response to the plot, the emotional tenor of the story, or the telling style (“if it’s really good and you really relate, your pulse goes up”).

Emotional

Eleven listeners made general statements of their emotional involvement. One person said, “Sometimes I get emotionally involved in them [stories].” Some listeners were more specific, tending to link their emotions with those of the story *telling*. “I feel some elation if the person is expressing that,” said one participant. Another listener agreed that the telling influenced her emotions: “they’d get excited, [so] I would get excited.” Others felt the emotions of the *story* were very influential. One person said, “the tale was moving,” and “the insensitivity of the [story] wife to the children, that was kind of a painful spot in the story; that was very touching.”

Several listeners drew a connection between their current emotional response to a story and past experiences. “My favorite stories make me feel like various other stories I have heard,” said one girl. An older woman, who had just heard a personal narrative during which she envisioned

herself as the main story character, said, “I think it was the emotions of how you actually felt at that time when that event happened, versus . . . the fact that you’re right here.” Two other participants spoke of their emotional response to the storylistening experience as a whole.

Control

The participants of this study phrased their perceptions of the storylistening trance in two very different ways. Thirteen participants used active verbs at some point during the interview (“I can zero in,” or “I put myself into”) that conveyed a sense of their control over the process, an effort on their part to enter or stay in the trance. Eighteen used passive verbs (“I get caught up,” or “I’m taken there”) or active verbs relating to the control of the process by something other than themselves (“it made you feel,” or “the storyteller brings you to that point”), which connoted a loss or lack of control, an effortlessness on the listener’s part as the experience takes over. Interestingly, many of the participants used both phraseologies, though the most prevalent stance was the feeling of lack of control.

“Placeness”

A characteristic of the storylistening trance, evident in the participants’ comments mentioned previously, is that it has a definite spatial quality, a “placeness,” which is usually referred to as “in” or “there.” This may be linked to listeners’ sense of the reality of the story, and it is fascinating that thirteen of the listeners interviewed chose these words to describe the experience. They were not beside the story, though it did have an “edge” they were within it, surrounded by, and immersed in, the story environment and characters. One woman exclaimed, “I feel I’m inside the story . . . I’m sitting there totally in the story.” “I’m caught up in it,” said one man, and another agreed, “it captivates you into the story.” Others preferred the concept of “there” to describe the space within which the story takes place and to which they go when listening. “I was just there,” said one woman. One man mentioned that, “You just kind of get lost there,” while another said, “It’s like I’m really there sometimes.” One unique perspective alluded to a three-dimensional space for the phenomenon. This woman felt that when she was “in” a story she was “seeing a movie *in front of your face*.” Though this may be only a figure of speech, it also seems to indicate a particular, spatial reference for this woman; the story world is a mental construct, but it can spill over into perceptual space.

Time Distortion

Time distortion, or the lengthening or shortening of one’s subjective perception of time, is characteristic of many altered states of consciousness, and four participants in this study alluded to it. From the data collected during these interviews, time distortion does not appear to have a consistent direction: some people find that time goes more quickly and others find it goes more slowly. “I didn’t think it [the story] was very long . . . like five [minutes],” said one girl, though this story was the longest of the entire storytelling session, lasting just over eleven minutes. Another participant also felt that brevity was characteristic of being involved in a story: “time goes pretty quickly usually when you’re in the story.”

“The story seemed longer, because it just gets you into it, and it seems longer to me that way,” said one boy, who felt that an eleven-minute story lasted “an hour to an hour and a half.” One participant even tried to provide a cause for the experience; she said, “His [story] seemed very

long to me, partly because he went on such a long journey.” She felt that the storyteller “was totally controlling my subjective experience of time,” and that, “he could drag it out or speed it up.”

Influences On The Storylistening Trance

There are many influences on a listener’s state of consciousness during a storytelling event that may either increase or decrease the likelihood of a trance state occurring. These influences differ from the characteristics of the storylistening trance mentioned above in that they tend to trigger or inhibit the trance experience rather than describe it. The listeners interviewed mentioned a variety of positive influences, including: the storytelling style, the activation of the listener’s memories, the listener’s feeling of safety or comfort (both physical and emotional), the story content, the storyteller’s ability, the storyteller’s involvement in the story, the listener’s expectations being met, the listener’s personal preferences being matched, the listener’s occupation or training, the sense of a rapport between the listener and the storyteller, the novelty or familiarity of the story, rhythm, humor, and recency. They also mentioned negative influences that can be grouped under the heading of “distractions.”

Storytelling Style

All of the participants in this study mentioned that some element of the storytelling style influenced their listening experience. Participants seemed to feel, though there were exceptions, that the most involving storytelling style was a descriptive one (“his descriptions were so vivid,” “she likes to describe things so that you can get a picture in your head”) in which the pacing was moderate (“[I don’t like when] they talk too fast to me,” “probably midway [pace is best]”). The participants also mentioned that the telling style should be appropriate for the story (“an understated style which I feel was appropriate for a winter’s tale”), the teller (“what is partly so beautiful about [storytellers’ styles] is that they are so uniquely individual”), and the listener (“[a style that is] similar to how I experience things”). Younger listeners found a vocally and kinesthetically exaggerated style the most involving, while older listeners preferred an understated, subtle, or “laid back” style.

Activation of the Listener’s Memories

Fourteen of the twenty-two participants mentioned that when they listened to stories they were often reminded of past experiences in their lives, and the storylistening experience became for them a combination of living the story and reliving the memory. Sometimes the memory was strong enough that it, in some ways, pre-empted the story plot, and the listener found himself or herself experiencing the memory more strongly than the story (i.e., the characters in the story were replaced by those of the memory, and the setting became, not the one described by the storyteller but the one remembered by the listener). Three different kinds of memories were recalled: twelve participants mentioned memories of distant past (often childhood) experiences similar or identical to the one in the story (“I got the same feeling I did as a child”), four participants mentioned memories of past experiences of the same story or ones with similar plots or themes (“it [story] reminded me of fairytales I read as a child”), and eight participants spoke of memories of recent or ongoing events that were similar to the ones being described in the story (“my mother is going through the same process”). There seemed to be a strong link

between the story plot or setting and the memory plot or setting; in other words, the stories did not—at least for these participants—recall entirely unrelated memories.

Sense of Comfort and Safety

Of the thirteen participants who mentioned the idea of comfort, nine spoke of wanting to feel emotionally comfortable and safe. One element of this was very individual, a sense of personal comfort (“I was comfortable here and didn’t really have to pay attention to what was happening”), while another part was communal; they wanted to feel part of a community in which they could disappear and not be noticed so that they felt free to enjoy the story without scrutiny or judgment, and they agreed that the storylistening environment provided exactly that atmosphere (“it’s very non-threatening . . . the attention is not called to us, the audience . . . we’re made safe immediately”). Four of them mentioned that their physical comfort was important and affected their enjoyment of, and involvement in, the story (for example, one participant said that he found stories more “transporting” depending on “the environment and . . . how comfortable it is”).

Story Content

While the emotional comfort of the listener is important to enable him or her to become involved in the story, “the story itself is also important.” Fourteen of those interviewed mentioned something about the influence of the story content, whether it was a generic statement like the one above, or something specific like an identification with the type of story (“[the storyteller] touches a chord with me because of the type of stories he tells”), the subject of the story (“it may have just been my interest in whatever the topic was”), or an emotional relation to a particular theme (the “genetic strength” of the story characters).

Storyteller’s Ability

Ten participants mentioned their sense of wonder at the ability of storytellers to perform; some people, who were not familiar with the storyteller, would express this admiration after the fact, claiming that it had increased their involvement in the story (it fascinated one listener how the storyteller “could just keep his thought going and bring in so many details and pull in so much information and history and weave it all together and make an interesting story”). Others came to listen to favorite storytellers precisely because of their ability (“she’s the master storyteller, she’s like a writer, an author, she’s Shakespeare”). For these people there was an expectation of greatness that predisposed them to enjoy and get involved in the stories they heard from that teller.

Storyteller’s Involvement

Another element, to which seven listeners referred, was the storyteller’s perceptible involvement in her story; a storyteller who left the listeners feeling as though she did not care about her characters or what happened to them, or that she had no vested interest in them, often failed to create an atmosphere conducive to the entrancement of the listeners (“she told the story well . . . but it wasn’t like it related to her . . . she was a good storyteller, but it wasn’t her own story”). On the other hand, a storyteller who was involved in a story seemed able to convey the importance of the story more effectively; it then became something of importance to the listeners, and they

became more involved in it (“the love that I feel for their stories is a direct measure of the love that they put out in their stories”).

Expectations

Nine of the participants attended the storytelling event with a set of prior expectations of what would happen, or what they wanted to happen (“having read articles about storytelling, it was exactly what I expected”). Having the storytelling meet or surpass what one expects seems to deepen the listener’s involvement in the story (“from previous experience I know that some of them I’m going to find more entertaining and engrossing than others”), while having it differ from what is expected may be disappointing and serve to distract the listener (one woman “expected quiet listening, not participation,” and she did not enjoy the participation story much).

Personal Preferences

Just as the listeners’ expectations of the event influence what they experience, so, too, do their personal preferences. Thirteen participants mentioned that they found stories matching their personal preferences more involving than those stories that did not. A listener who enjoyed energy responded to an energetic performer and vice versa (“I’m more of a quieter story person”). A listener who liked family life preferred stories about families (“I liked the story because it was [about the] family”), and one girl preferred the animal stories because “I like animals.” The preferences of the participants were as varied as the individuals, and no pattern emerged from their responses regarding one or two common preferences.

Training/Social Roles

An entirely unexpected influence on the listeners’ ability to experience the storylistening trance was their occupation or training. Only three listeners, all women, mentioned this influence, and two of the three claimed that their training detracted from their involvement. One was a nurse who said that she found it difficult to become deeply involved in a story because “I’m trained to listen to everything that’s happening around me.” The second was a teacher who claimed, “I’m aware that I tend to be critical and tend to pick holes in people’s presentations because that’s been my job.” For storytelling this woman tells herself to “just sit there and relax and enjoy it for heaven’s sake; you don’t have to grade these people.” One woman mentioned that her training in shamanic journeying facilitated her involvement in storytelling: “just getting lost [in a story]; it’s a decision I think that I make now that maybe kids don’t . . . because I had to do it consciously for shamanic work.”

Rapport with the Storyteller

Ten participants mentioned the rapport between the storyteller and the audience that helped them get involved in the teller’s story. This rapport ranged from a general familiarity with the storyteller’s background to a complete identification with the storyteller and an assumption of that role. One woman said, “I have known and watched him [a particular storyteller] for twenty years, and so I’m seeing the history of this man growing.” When I asked if one participant made a connection with a story, she replied, “Well, just with her [the storyteller].” For one girl this connection had fascinating results: she took on the role of the storyteller. “I felt like I was telling the story,” she said of her favorite tale. This girl felt so “at one” with the story and the storyteller

that she took the position of storyteller for herself. Though none of the other participants expressed it quite this succinctly, this is perhaps what they all do as they create mental pictures and superimpose their own memories onto the story characters and events (see Georges 1969). Each listener takes charge of a uniquely personal experience of storylistening, and each is his or her own storyteller.

Novelty and Familiarity

Another influence on the listener's experience of the storylistening trance is the novelty or familiarity of the experience (see Deikman 1973). Both of these ideas, though seemingly contradictory, play a special role. The enjoyment of familiar stories (mentioned by seven participants) may be linked to the sense of comfort and safety mentioned previously or to the evocation of memories. "When I was younger, I liked the same stories over and over," said one girl, but "I like hearing new stories now that I'm older." Still, she did say that her "favorite stories make me feel like various other stories I've heard." For her, the familiar story was a reassurance as an infant, and the novel story was a challenge to make connections with the past as an older person. For one woman, the familiar story was an invitation to relax: "I've heard that story before, [so] I'm just going to let myself enjoy this." To another it was an invitation to trance: "I was captivated because she tells some of the stories that I like very much."

Novelty was mentioned by three participants as an influence on their involvement in the stories they heard. "I like things that I haven't figured out before [the storyteller] gets to it," said one woman. Another claimed she got involved in one story because it gave her a novel perspective on history.

Rhythm

Rhythm influenced participants' involvement in storylistening, though it was not often cited. It may be that rhythm is difficult to describe (it is more "felt" than verbalized), and the particular, subtle rhythms of storytelling may escape notice while remaining very influential. It may also be that rhythm plays a minor role in the storylistening trance. Rhythm has been cited by several researchers (Neher 1962; McDowell 1992) for its role in precipitating or prolonging trance in ritualistic settings. While only one of the participants in this study used the word "rhythm" to describe her perceptions, two others mentioned it implicitly while describing their experiences. When a story "captivated" one of these listeners, he described it as being "in sync with the experience" and "in movement with what's being presented."

Humor

Four participants mentioned that the humor during the performance helped engage their attention. When asked what made a particular story so appealing, one man responded, "It's just the humor of the situation." Another man described his favorite story as "funny . . . very interesting," and a boy explained how he liked a particular storyteller because "she likes to make people laugh." One woman, speaking for herself and her husband said, "we both like humor," and when questioned about one of her favorite storytellers, she said, "I don't think he's that visual, that's just a case where he's just funny."

Recency

There is little possibility that recency (i.e., a story that was *just* told) affects the listener's involvement in a story; by definition, a story can only be recent after the fact. There is, however, some evidence from the listeners' responses that recency *may* affect one's recollection of involvement, or at the very least, one's preferences. Two listeners addressed this issue. When I asked which story had been his favorite, one man said, "I enjoyed the last one [story], but I enjoy the last one every time." The other, a woman, said that she "preferred the second one because it's fresher in my memory." The research on memory decay indicates that one's ability to recall an event clearly decreases with time, and there may be an issue with participants confusing clear recall with involvement. In other words, some participants may believe they were more involved in a story because they can remember it more clearly, when, in fact, the issue is merely that the story was the most recent one they heard.

Distractions

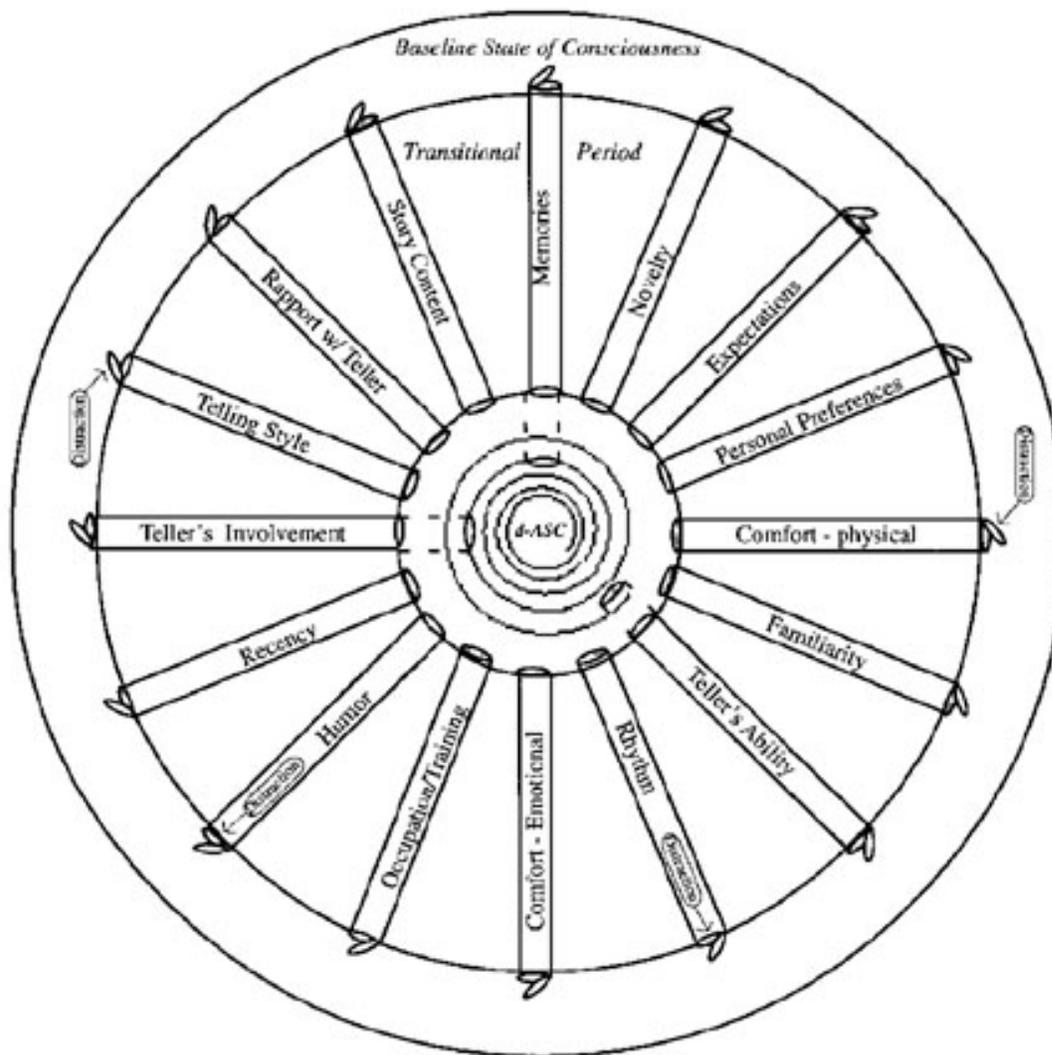
The remaining comments reflect those influences that decrease the likelihood of either experiencing the storylistening trance phenomenon or remaining within the trance, and they can best be categorized as "distractions." These distractions fell into six categories: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, technical, durational, and rhythmic.

Visual distractions were physical objects that attracted the listener's attention ("I was watching the little dogs instead," "his looks were distracting . . . so you don't listen and get as absorbed") or mental visualization problems ("the part I couldn't really picture was the chariot, and if the sun was being dragged across the sky [behind the chariot] or if the sun was the chariot"). Auditory distractions were either physical ("screaming babies" or "mistakes in speech") or mental ("my mind chatter's going on"). Kinesthetic distractions occur when the listener's attention is drawn to environmental factors ("I was a little too hot at the beginning") or bodily feelings ("I'm not feeling very well"). Technical distractions were those that involved performance errors by the storyteller ("[sometimes] a storyteller [will] tell a story that you don't enjoy so much because of the style; something seems to be lacking"). The "mistakes in speech" mentioned above would also fit in this category. Durational distractions are those due to the length of the story; usually the story is too long, and this leaves the listener fretful and distracted ("it went on and on and on"). Rhythmic distractions were breaks in an otherwise fluid performance that broke the "flow" of the story and jarred the listeners out of their trance ("he kind of hesitated, like he was reading off a prompter in his head").

Conclusions

Building on existing models of consciousness and storytelling, I have designed the diagram shown in figure 1 to represent my understanding of how the influences listed above may interact to form a system.

Figure 1.



The model is composed of three concentric circles representing the baseline state of consciousness, the transitional period, and the discrete altered state of consciousness, respectively. I have placed the d-ASC (the storylistening trance) *within* the baseline state of consciousness to follow the figurative language used by the participants as they described the sense of the “placeness” of the storylistening trance as “*in*.” The breadth of each circle is misleading (but prescribed by the typeface of the letters); the baseline would certainly be the largest one, both in size and volume, since people spend the majority of their lives there. The transitional period, for the storylistening trance experience, would best be displayed as very thin; it lasts moments, minutes at the longest. The trance itself would remain its current size; I believe this aptly represents the relative “extent” of the trance.

The spokes of the wheel, as it were, are portals or conduits from the baseline to the altered state of consciousness and are represented in the diagram as tubes. Each “conduit” is equipped with a

“valve” at the end that touches the b-SoC. This valve is generally about half open during normal consciousness, and it represents the ease with which consciousness can slip from one state to the altered state. If the valve is wide open, the conduit becomes readily accessible; if it is entirely closed, then that avenue of access to the altered state is blocked. The conduits themselves are labeled with the influences that the research participants identified. There are certainly others that I have not included because they did not surface during the interviews. For example, one of the characteristics of the storylistening trance is time distortion. I believe this characteristic can also serve as an influence; as one notices a change in one’s concept of time passing, it can intensify the effect and the trance. Time distortion, then, could also be represented as a conduit in this diagram (for that matter, it could also act as a distraction (d-ASC disruptive force) if it frightened you enough to break apart your trance state and reconstitute the baseline). I make no claim that these, and only these, conduits exist.

Distractions (of which there are four in the diagram, but of which there are many in reality) provide the impetus either to close the valves on the conduits if they occur while a person is in the baseline state of consciousness, or to open those valves if the distractions occur while a person is in an altered state, hence the force is shown on either side of the valves. Distractions can open or close the valve on any conduit, and one powerful distraction may affect all of them simultaneously. In short, a shift in consciousness is enabled by open conduits and hindered by closed ones. These valves can also be influenced by individual differences. For example, some people may never be swayed by rhythm; for them, rhythm is not a conduit to trance. For others, rhythm may be an essential and readily available conduit.

There seems to be a “distractibility threshold” below which a distraction is outweighed by one’s involvement and is not noticed (“distractions can be *large enough* to attract your attention,” said one man, and a woman claimed that the distraction had “to be pretty large if you’re concentrating”). This threshold is not visually represented, but it plays a role in the force needed to open or close the conduit valves. In other words, a slight distraction that occurs while one is in the baseline state of consciousness may not be “strong enough” to close the valves on any conduit, and so the person’s consciousness does not register it and is still able to access the altered state. If the person is already in the altered state and a slight distraction arises, this distraction may not be sufficient to open the conduit valves and allow (or force) the person’s consciousness to “escape” the trance. The person in normal consciousness can still enter the altered state in spite of the distraction, just as the person in the trance can remain there despite the distraction.

There were some participants who were not either “in” the story or “out” of it; they mentioned being able to be both “in” and “out” of the story *at the same moment*. They were able to be “totally there” and “captivated” while simultaneously monitoring the storyteller’s gestures or turns of phrase. These listeners did not seem to be indicating that they were *partially* doing one thing and *partially* doing the other, but that both were done exclusively and simultaneously (one woman said that she had a visual impression of the storyteller on stage, “but also *just* the sound as well”). If, as Tart (1975) proposes, this attention/awareness is an “energy,” something that can cause other things to happen (activate psychological subsystems, for example), then it need not be a localized energy; it could be pervasive.

In the current model, this attention/awareness energy is not represented by a location or a name, but it is nevertheless present. This energy is that which flows through the baseline, the conduits,

and the altered state. It is that which, when “caught up in” a story, flows through the conduits into the region of the altered state. There is, however, nothing that requires *all* of this energy to flow through the conduits; some of it might remain in the baseline to monitor the world (i.e., the car driver who becomes lost in his thoughts but remains on the road). This being true, a person could very easily be in multiple states of consciousness at any moment: some of his awareness would be flowing through the baseline state, some might be traversing to an altered state, and still more might be within the altered state. This perspective belies the exclusive nature of “this or that” and enables multiple awarenesses. Perhaps researchers should speak of attentions and awarenesses in the plural rather than the singular and see whether this opens up new insights.

At the center of the d-ASC area is a spiral with only a few of the conduits penetrating its sides. This spiral represents the depth of the altered state of consciousness. As a person goes deeper and deeper into trance (around the spiral), the conduits become harder to access. Some conduits, not necessarily the ones diagrammed here, may be able to reach deeper into the trance state, allowing the person a chance to exit; however, at the deepest levels of an altered state, egress can become difficult, if not impossible (in extreme psychosis, for example), but this rarely happens. There is no evidence, either in this research or in the literature that I have examined, that a person can go so deeply into the storylistening trance that the experience becomes a psychotic episode.

Implications for Library Media Specialists and Teachers

This study provides an initial understanding of a phenomenon known to most teachers and library media specialists: the involved student. Whether it is a child in a classroom who is lost in thought over a particular math problem or a student in the library media center deeply engrossed in a story, a computer game, or a difficult information search, many of the issues addressed in the above model are pertinent to understanding the child’s mind during those moments.

It may also influence the way in which instructors present information to students. The current educational emphasis on “situated learning”—in which teachers use real-life situations to illustrate abstract concepts—is supported by this research, since involvement is closely linked to memory. Teachers who can ground the abstract in the concrete by drawing on the experiences and memories of children have the greatest chance of capturing the children’s attention in a focused and meaningful way.

The issue of novelty or familiarity may prove to be age related, as the young girl in this study mentioned. She liked familiarity as a child and found it emotionally comforting, but as she grew older, she wanted the excitement and anticipation provided by novelty. For the library media specialist, this data has ramifications for the physical space of the media center (does it change often or is there some consistency to the use of space?), for the decorations used in the media center (should displays be changed often to ensure novelty, not at all to ensure familiarity, or gradually to appeal to both needs?), and for the design of interaction with students (flexible scheduling for novelty, fixed scheduling for familiarity). Perhaps younger students will react more positively to fixed scheduling due, in part, to this sense of the familiar (rhythm may have an influence here as well), while older students need more flexibility to stimulate their interest.

In an age when children are increasingly faced with violence in the schools, how can library media specialists and teachers create the necessary physical and emotional comfort necessary for

this altered state of consciousness to manifest? If students' expectations of school are negative, can they be expected to become involved? Can school personnel use some of the techniques of storytelling to increase the involvement of their students in the subject at hand?

Perhaps the two most important influences found in this study that are relevant for library media specialists and teachers are rapport with the storyteller and the storyteller's involvement. These items surfaced consistently in my interviews with storylisteners. Without a sense of rapport with the storyteller, the listeners did not feel invited to be part of the evolving tale; they were left on the outskirts, watching the tale unfold and not engaging it personally and completely. This feeling of being on the outside rather than enmeshed in the story was indicative of a lack of involvement on the part of the listener. It was also usually a sign that the teller was not involved in the experience either. The involved teller's enthusiasm for the story was contagious; so is that of the involved teacher or library media specialist. If we love the subjects we teach, and if we share that enthusiasm with our students, they are much more likely to join in the exuberant search for knowledge that is fundamental to life-long learning. I am sure there are other connections to be found, and I hope that readers will use this research as a springboard for their own explorations.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are numerous areas for research about storytelling and the storylistening d-ASC that this study did not address. One area that could produce new insight is the exploration of brain function and the storylistening trance. A study could delve into the possible influences of brain hemispheric differentiation. The left hemisphere is thought to be more analytical, linear, and the verbal processing center, while the right hemisphere is more spatially oriented and processes images and patterns. A researcher could use electroencephalographic techniques to discern the brain's functioning during storylistening.

This study made no attempt to explore the uses of the storylistening trance; however, further research into the medical applications of storytelling to reduce pain and the utility of storytelling for counseling or therapeutic purposes could provide information on a different aspect of the storylistening trance. Storytelling as a physical healing tool is another possibility for research; perhaps studying the use of stories and incantations in medieval and tribal healing ceremonies would be productive, as would a comparison between the storylistening trance phenomenon and various other altered states of consciousness to determine the common and unique qualities among them.

In terms of building directly on the current research study, further exploration into any of the influences and characteristics of the storylistening d-ASC would build the research base on the topic. More controlled or experimental studies should be conducted to determine the relationships among the various influences cited in this study. Research could focus on the concepts of novelty and familiarity to determine whether these seeming opposites do, in fact, conflict. Further inquiry into the relationship between "story" time and chronological time could illuminate the time distortion characteristic of the storylistening trance. Other research studies might find new influences on the listener's perception of time: the time of day or the pace of the telling, for example. More research is also needed to discover whether there are underlying rhythms in storytelling that could lead to trance.

Though the participants in this study did not mention metaphor as an influence, research to discover the impact of metaphor on the storylistening trance is badly needed. Does increased use of figurative language by the storyteller increase the possibilities of interpretation and thereby increase trance, or does the listener need more concrete images to develop the visualizations so vital to storylistening?

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Appendix: Related Links

1. *Storytelling Magazine* is a benefit of membership in the National Storytelling Association (www.storynet.org/index2.htm). Their Web site contains a wealth of information and links about storytelling.
2. An excellent list of resources as well as some background information on reader's response assembled by Kay Vandergrift can be found at www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/kay/readerresponse.html.
3. More information on Charles T. Tart and his theories of consciousness can be found on his homepage at <http://paradigm-sys.com/cttart/>.
4. A useful set of links to help you learn more about situated learning can be found at <http://scottlab.human.waseda.ac.jp/situated.html>.

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