

All professions, all work, all activity in the human world finds its essential meaning in the context of a people's cosmic story. — Brian Swimme

Stories Within Stories

Each of us is a story within stories. My daughter's life story is part of both my story and her mother's story. The story of our family is likewise part of other stories larger than our own: the story of our town, our state, our nation, Western civilization, humanity, planet Earth, and the story of the Universe itself. Each of us is a story within stories within stories.

There is a dynamic relationship between every story, the larger stories it is part of, and the smaller stories that are a part of it. Larger stories influence and add meaning to the stories that are nestled within them. For example, if my wife and I were to move across the country, my daughter's story would be affected. Similarly, if my nation goes through a severe economic depression, experiences prolonged drought, or undergoes a major spiritual awakening, my community's story, my story, and my daughter's story will each be affected. The destiny of every story is affected by the larger stories of which it is a part.

Importance or significance, of course, is relative. An important event in one story will be an important event in all the stories that are nestled within it, but may be relatively insignificant for the larger stories in which it itself is nestled. For example, if the major employer in my town, a factory where I have worked for the past twenty-five years, closes permanently, this would be a significant event in the story of my community, as well as in my story, and in my daughter's story. But it would not be particularly significant within the story of Western civilization. Something significant in the story of Western civilization, however, like an economic and ecological collapse, or a nuclear war, would also be significant for each of the smaller stories nestled within the story of Western civilization, such as the story of my community, my story and my daughter's story.

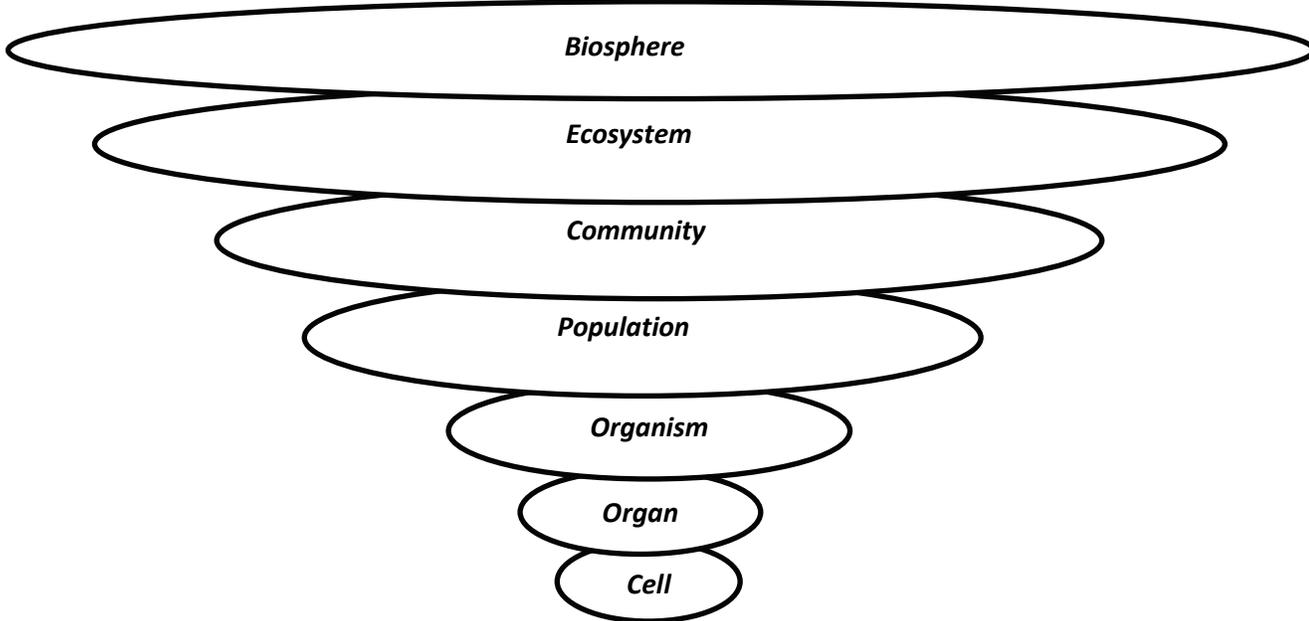
When we ask the question, "Why?", we ask about the meaning or context of something. We can understand personal meaning by using the metaphor that we are each a story within stories. The meaning of some thing or event is apparent in its larger context. A tragedy has meaning in terms of the bigger picture, or larger story. An elderly woman who dies while saving a young child's life can be said to have died a tragic, yet meaningful, death. The question, "Why did she have to die?" may be answered meaningfully by looking at the larger perspective.

When we want to know the meaning of something we are asking, "How does this fit into the bigger picture? How does this make sense in terms of the larger story? The larger the context, generally the deeper the meaning.

FROM: The Big Picture by Michael Dowd (<http://www.thegreatstory.org/Bigpicture1.html>)

A holarchy of “self”

In a living systems hierarchy, we “look up” for purpose and “look down” for function. That is the purpose of the smaller subsystem (the cell for example) is found in the larger, more inclusive system “above” (the organ). In the natural systems hierarchy (also called a holarchy) depicted below, the smaller subsystem is where you find the function or mechanism that makes the larger more inclusive (higher) subsystem work.



If we applied this same understanding to the “self” (as if we humans were also part of a natural system), we might find purpose in higher, more inclusive systems. We might “look up for purpose.”

