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The Entrepreneur's Proposal: A Small Drama

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Here is a very different narrative!

We enter a small restaurant located in a cobbled back street of the city. It is mid-evening and there are three couples at various stages of their meals in the pleasant candle-lit ambience of this theatre-themed and slightly old-fashioned eating place. We move into hearing range of one of these couples. They are both in their late thirties and are dressed as if they have gone out to dine straight from their respective business activities. They each have a glass of cognac in their hand.

Geoffrey: How long have we been going out together now, Val?

Valerie: Not that long, Geoff. It is some time ago that we met, yes. But, on the other hand, I haven't seen you that much have I? You're off here and there on business so often that I sometimes forget what you look like.

Geoffrey: That's a bit of an exaggeration, Val. I admit that it would be different if I had an ordinary job. But the economy must have entrepreneurs like me who go out there and make things happen; following dreams and all that rather than doing the old 9-5 sort of thing.

Valerie: What do you mean, 'dreams'?

Geoffrey: Well, you know: living the dream rather than taking orders from some boss. I am too much my own man to be part of somebody else's operation. I like moving things along. I like shaking things up with the deals I do.

Valerie: But you still haven't told me what you mean about your dreams.

Geoffrey: But you do know what I mean. You must have noticed that several of the people who collected awards at the dinner where we met talked of chasing their dreams.

Valerie: I certainly did notice. They went on about dreams and how they had to fight their way through all sorts of difficulties and 'challenges' to achieve them. I had to laugh at a couple of these. They went on about how they were mavericks and how hard-headed and shrewd they were. And then, without a touch of irony, they shifted into this soft-headed talk about dreams. 'What's that all about?', I asked myself.

Geoffrey: That's just because you're a cynical journalist.

Valerie: So why did I agree to go out with you when you asked me? It wasn't because I thought you were a dreamer, I can tell you.

Geoffrey: No, you recognised that I was someone who was going somewhere. You seemed rather impressed about what I had brought off with the Riverside development. You showed great interest in what I had achieved there.

Valerie: Oh, Geoff. *That* was the journalist in me, always looking for information. The truth of the matter is that I was intrigued by you. I thought there was possibly a very nice man behind the swash-buckling entrepreneur image.

Geoffrey: But you like the entrepreneur side of me, don't you Val? You really liked it when I got that great deal for you on the Lexus, didn't you?

Valerie: Oh Geoffrey!

Geoffrey: What?

Valerie: What are you like?

Geoffrey: I am a nice bloke. But I love grabbing opportunities.

Valerie: You what?

Geoffrey: I was just thinking about this restaurant. I think that tomorrow I'll look into what I might be able to get it for. Can't you see the potential? It could be a great investment. If we...

Valerie: Geoff, Geoff, Geoff.

Geoffrey: Sorry Val. I didn't mean to annoy you. Sorry. May I change the subject?

Valerie: I am not annoyed, Geoff. I really do like you, but...

Geoffrey: Well, it's good that you have these feelings for me. I would like you to marry me. I've got you this ring.

Valerie: You felt sure enough of yourself to buy me a ring? Oh for goodness sake, Geoffrey.

Geoffrey: That's me. I know what I want and I go for it. You, know: entrepreneurs and their dreams. And I have to say that I got a very good deal on the ring.

Valerie: That does it, Geoffrey, it really does.

Geoffrey: What do you mean? Val, please...

Valerie: I am not going to marry you, Geoffrey. I am not going to marry a bloody entrepreneur.

A Postscript (or restorying of the drama)

So what is going on here? What is this story about? Given the context in which it is presented, you will infer that it must be about how entrepreneurship is 'storied' or, if you like, is 'discursively framed' in our contemporary culture. That is indeed the case. But, you might come back, what sort of contribution can it possibly make, since it is clearly 'fiction' rather than 'research data'? You would be right to recognise that we have here a carefully created narrative in which we meet, get to know and then part from a courting couple, one of whom is a self-declared entrepreneur and the other a journalist. Yet, whilst this is indeed a dramatic and fictional presentation, it is at the same time the product of an ongoing ethnographically-oriented research study of 'entrepreneurial action'. It uses the fiction-writer's techniques to present some 'truths' about certain aspects of modern social life (Watson 2000, Watson 2004, Humphreys and Watson, 2009) which are

emerging from this research. Each reader of this little play will make their own interpretation of the script, in the light of their personal ideas about how 'the entrepreneur' is storied in modern society. We could leave it at that. Perhaps one should leave it at that if one has faith in the power of narrative and creative writing in the dissemination of research. However, it might be helpful to explain a little more of the link between the writing of the little play and both the research context from which it emerged and the wider theme of the contemporary storying of entrepreneurship.

I read Warren and Smith's (2010) invitation to think about the possibility of newer ways of accounting for entrepreneurship only hours before meeting one of my key research 'informants'. And after showing me a recently published newspaper article in which he was referred to as a 'well-known local entrepreneur', the respondent [Jim Wright] said to me, 'I suppose I quite like that'. But when I asked him why he liked it, he contradicted himself, 'No, I don't really like it. I much prefer to be known as Jim Wright – a bloke who's done well for himself and his family - and done well for his customers'. When pressed further he started to laugh and said, 'Just imagine that if some new neighbours moved into our village and I introduced myself as "Jim Wright, the entrepreneur"; wouldn't I look a prat? Or if I met a smart woman at one of these award dinners and I said, "Lovely to meet you, I am an entrepreneur..." – what a social disaster that would be!' 'Why?' I asked. 'Just think about it', he said before getting into his car and driving off to his next meeting, 'Just think about it'.

As I walked back to my own car, I reflected on Jim's instruction, 'Just think about it'. I tried to picture a self-styled entrepreneur at one of the award dinners Jim had referred to in our conversation, developing an entrepreneurial 'chat up' line. But the comic narrative that started in my ethnographic imagination soon moved from the award dinner to a rather different situation; the one we see in the play. The play could thus be seen as presenting, in fictional form, the view of an individual who is often the 'real' character in entrepreneurial stories. Jim Wright, as I know from various conversations with him, would not necessarily question Warren and Smith's recognition that 'maverick-hero' entrepreneur stories 'are circulated widely in the public consciousness'. But he, and indeed other of my research subjects, would point out that this is not the only story in circulation. What we might call 'other-storying', as opposed to 're-storying' has been going on for some time – not least in UK television comedies portraying self-important entrepreneurial buffoons such as Arthur Daley, Del Boy Trotter and Archie Daley [fictional British entrepreneurs portrayed in television comedies]. That fact that there is more than one entrepreneurship 'story' out there does not, however, undermine the argument that we need some re-storying of entrepreneurship.

Discussions with my research informants and entrepreneurial friends suggest that there are problems with the very idea of the 'entrepreneur'. Their discomfort with the notion comes, I think, from the influence on them of both the hero-entrepreneur stories and the genre of buffoon-buccaneer stories. This is what Jim Wright was encouraging me to think about after he envisaged introducing himself as an 'entrepreneur' to new neighbours or to a potential woman friend. A view that Jim and I share is that we would all benefit if we put to one side our obsession with entrepreneurs as the focal characters of stories of entrepreneurship (be they hero or villain stories) and developed stories of enterprising activities instead, whether these occur in our local baker's business, our regional hospital or in global business enterprises. Entrepreneurship is too important to modern societies to mix it up too much with the characters and foibles of individual men and women - be they puffed-up clowns or genuine business pioneers.

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