

Thoughts from Dan Wulff



Re-writing

As I was writing this short article, I kept starting and re-starting, not quite satisfied with the way it was shaping up. My initial idea was to write about some troubles my wife and I had on a recent United Airlines flight in order to highlight the abuses and insensitivities of big business on the individual consumer. The point was to show how social constructionists can take positions and strongly advocate, a notion that counters the positivist's view that social constructionists are "rampant relativists" and cannot take a stand.

But I had a nagging feeling that there was more to the story than I was conveying. It seemed that my story about United Airlines was strong and overpowering, that somehow it had "taken me over." I felt a sort of missionary zeal that was both energizing and constraining – I felt possessed by the story, by what I thought was right and just. Upon reflection, I felt like I was occupying a positivistic position of certainty.

Social constructionists live and breathe in the world, take positions, make decisions, make differences. So of course we act in the world, but an important distinction may be that social constructionists (and others) tend to be ready, willing, and able to appreciate alternative positions or even to shift positions if warranted. With an appreciation of multiple possible viewpoints and positions, the need to be locked into one best or true choice is unnecessary and at times quite unhelpful. We take preferred positions, but with new information or new contexts, we can re-evaluate and adjust.

So my whole story about United and how mad I was at them has turned down a different road – not that I am not mad at United (I still am!). But I have a flexibility to place that entire situation into a variety of frames – one that maintains my anger, one that ignores it, one that enjoys it, one that urges me to take action, one that inspires me to write, etc. The initial commitment I had to spit venom at United now takes its rightful place alongside a host of other options. In some ways, the justifiable reaction of anger and retribution had me "under its influence," extending and deepening the whole fiasco with United even further than the precipitating event had. Holding onto a single position can sometimes be suffocating. Now my choices are richer, more textured, more up to me.

Appreciating multiple realities frees me from being encapsulated by singular positions, emotions, or commitments. Believing in multiple realities allows me to come and go, come and stay, become excited, or relax. Valuing multiple realities even allows me to settle into a preferred reality if I choose. I will not go so far as to say that I am thankful for United's treatment of us, but it has provided me with a grounding from which to express some thoughts about how important multiple viewpoints/realities can be in everyday life.

Re-writing my initial story has been very satisfying. My initial story was in charge of me and the re-writing feels more like what I wanted to say to you. It took time for me to tease it out, but it is a more satisfying story for me. How about you?