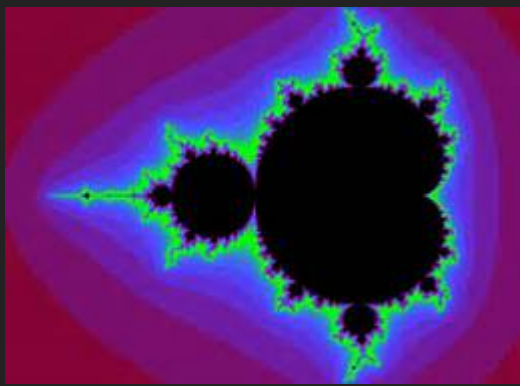
The background is a dark, textured surface with concentric, wavy lines that create a sense of depth and movement. A bright, glowing blue line with a wavy, undulating pattern runs horizontally across the middle of the image, adding a dynamic element to the composition.

**Your life is a “story  
within a larger  
”  
story”**

John M. Gerber

## Your life is a “story within a larger story”

FROM: <https://agsystemsthinking.net/2017/12/01/story-in-a-story/>



When I introduce my Agricultural Systems Thinking class to the concept of hierarchy, I often use our own lives as a metaphor for “subsystems within larger systems.” In this blog, I will try to examine the relationship of subsystems within a natural systems hierarchy (or holarchy) to the “system above”, which provides the “system below” with meaning. But first, let's examine the title of the blog “*your life is a story within stories.*” I borrowed this metaphor from a wonderful systems thinker, Michael Dowd, who wrote ”

*“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.”*

As if the universe was trying to affirm this message, I opened a little book this morning which I had picked up at the library yesterday and read the first line in *Hunger Mountain* by David Hinton. He wrote, “*things are themselves only as they belong to something more than themselves: I to we, we to earth, earth to planet and stars...*”

This might be depicted as follows:



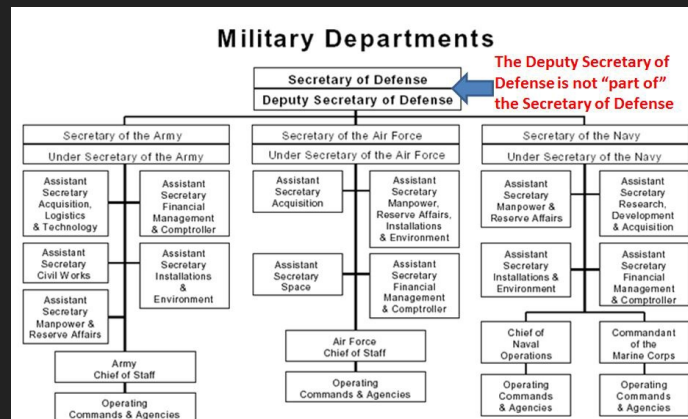
I find meaning and purpose in my life by being useful to a system (story) larger than myself, in which my life is embedded. This mental model of relationships helps me to know who I am and why I am here. And it helps me choose how to invest my limited time on this planet.

I sometimes wonder if the many addictions that humans seem to, .... well, become addicted to, result from a life focused on the little “myself” without a strong connection to the larger story. And of course the addictions are many:

- drugs (prescribed and illegal)
- alcohol (at least its legal)
- recreational sex (friends with benefits in today’s common lingo)
- passive consumption of violent sports (football, hockey.....)
- shopping (the number one addiction in America)

Of course, when not taken to the extreme these are normal human behaviors. But we seem to be addicted to “the extreme.” I wonder if these common addictions are coping mechanisms for a life lived without a sense of purpose, or a connection to that system (story) larger than the little “myself.”

I believe we find meaning and purpose in “larger” systems (in which our lives are embedded) because indeed, we are an intimate part of those larger natural systems. This is not necessarily true however, for a human-constructed hierarchy.



We may not want to invest our lives in the next higher system in a human constructed hierarchy. We may simply choose to “do our job” and take our paycheck home. Many people today, seem to be willing to settle for this sort of life. This seems a little sad to me. I’m reminded of a Robert Frost poem, *Two Tramps at MudTime* where he writes;

*My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation.*

I wonder how many of us are blessed with a vocation (that which we need to do) that is also an avocation (that which we love).

Frost continues:

*Only where love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For heaven and the future’s sakes.*

When we live within a human-constructed hierarchy, we may not be in a position to work for *"heaven and the future's sake."* Whereas, in a natural systems hierarchy, each subsystem is an intimate part of the next "larger" system. We have no choice but to play for mortal stakes! Indeed, we (the organism in the graphic below) contribute to the health (or ill health) of the human population, the larger ecosystem, the planet.....



When I see myself as part of a human constructed hierarchy, I am likely to be competitive and selfish. When I see myself as part of a natural systems hierarchy, a living system, it is in my best "self" interest to work for the good of the next larger system!

There is a visual tool that might help us picture the relationship among levels of complexity within a natural hierarchy called the Mandelbrot Set. This is a mathematical set of points with a unique and distinctive shape. As you look more closely at the shape however, you see the same shape repeated over and over again, seemingly infinitely.

A system in nature consists of smaller systems, upon which it depends. Likewise the smaller systems are completely dependent on the larger system. That is, we are stories within stories or using the Mandelbrot metaphor, common shapes within shapes.

If we are not blessed with a healthy family and community (and I believe that those of us that are blessed with a healthy family or community have a special responsibility to contribute to the well-being of others), still.... we ALL have a common, and powerful story. It is *The Great Story*, and it is *the greatest story ever told!*



When we see ourselves serving a human constructed hierarchy of power and control, we may become scared and selfish. And then the addiction that seems to dominate the national dialogue in America emerges, *anger*.

On the other hand, when we see ourselves as part of The Great Story of the continued evolution of the universe, we may choose to be of service to family, community, the planet, the universe, or even the divine. When we see ourselves as something MUCH larger than the little "myself" – we may recognize our larger purpose and our obligations to other beings (both human and otherwise).

*I believe we have a choice.....*