

- Strengthen or work with the collective field within a business, industry or community.
- Make “safe enough” spaces for people to show up more fully/allowing the dissenting voice to be heard/enabling the hard conversations to be had without breaking the system.
- Create collective muscle for “leaning in”.

fall under what I’d call *StoryWork*.

Being able to work with the stories already alive in workplace or community is paramount to people feeling like they are heard, invited to contribute and able to listen to others. We can never make totally safe spaces for people to share their stories, but we can make *safe enough* spaces. From a community or societal point of view, this is absolutely pivotal now, as fear of “the other” and fragmentation grows.

Once we share stories, we can never see each other in the same way again. We forge some understanding and find a little common ground, a place to meet. We begin to see behind the curtain.

In the merger process I described above, two senior leadership teams were combined into one. It was a challenging and emotional process for everyone involved. For some time it didn’t feel like the teams would be able to understand each other, let alone do the hard work it would take to merge the two structures. We began with an appreciative interview between the teams, sharing stories about our experiences of high-performing teams and our dreams for the success of the merger. This work provided a ground where the teams could meet.

From that ground, we began to discover the very different ways of working that existed in the two teams. They were using the same words but meaning different things. This cleared up much of the confusion between them and paved the way for the ongoing work of moving along together.

We build connection, as well as the collective muscle for leaning in—staying together, rather than falling apart—when hard stories or big emotions arise or when difficult discussions need to be had. We also build a space for the dissenting voice to show up. In many organisations, it can be unsafe to bring emotions to the table, to question or to disagree. Is questioning, for example, a way to deeper understanding or a demonstration of unpreparedness? That depends on the culture.

A West German friend recently told me she discovered that very difference when she first met her East German husband’s family. In her family, questions indicated curiosity to know more about the other. In his family, they represented something entirely different! She found herself wondering why they were so silent and had to learn that the lack of questions didn’t indicate a lack of willingness to engage with her. It simply meant they had grown up in a different culture.

2.1.2 Seeing Self and Story as Positive Change Agents

It is important to realise that stories are a potent support in positive change making. At this point in history, we seem to be mesmerised by stories of violence, fear, anger and war. Stories can also be used to help us grow courage, collaboration and connection. It all depends on what you are using your stories *for*.

For me, *seeing self and story as positive change agents* has these components:

- Working with my own StoryField²/creating emotional resilience so I can also listen to others, even if their stories are very different to mine
- Discovering/exploring the stories in the field around me
- Using StoryWork to help develop the potential for positive change
- Reinforcing the Heliotropic Principle
- Embodying the Principle of Enactment

None of us is a single narrative; each of us is the intersection of the stories we hold about ourselves and all the stories others hold about us. And to add to that mix, the stories we receive from:

- Our family constellation and our peers
- Our ethnic groupings, religious or belief practices
- Our regional or national identity
- Our surrounding gender and societal roles
- Society at large

We are each easily the most amazingly unique story cocktails! We are literally “StoryFields”.

Some stories are ingrained in us while growing up, others slip in unannounced and yet others—like national identity—co-opt us, either willingly or not. Because of the way stories work in the brain, we are less stereotypers than “story-o-typers³”, applying our stories of people, places and things like an overlay to help us make sense of the world.

Since story is our lens on the world and therefore the filter for how we take action, becoming more aware of your own storylines is important. The more you have worked with your own stories and the dissonance within yourself, the more you can be resilient around stories you don’t agree with or find confronting. Other people’s stories are literally just someone else’s perspective on the world, but it might not feel that simple!

This awareness is vitally important for leaders: firstly, because leaders receive projections from those around them, perhaps someone’s expectations or fears of someone in an authority position or perhaps their wounding from a previous hierarchical system or their more basic need for a mother or father figure, and secondly because your own unresolved material means you can be more easily triggered and therefore less in balance when making decisions.

²I first heard the term “story field” used around a conference called by US peace activist Tom Atlee in 2007. I have continued to play with this concept writing about it in an unpublished paper in 2009. He now calls this work “storycology”.

³I’ve loved this term since I first heard it but admit to not remembering the source. Apologies to whoever you are!

Every system is already full of stories—learning how to identify, work with and shape these is also a key leadership role. Within the merger process, we used Appreciative Inquiry as our foundation for working with the stories inherent in the two systems coming together. The Advisory Team identified three key elements they believed would immediately catapult the new organisation into a leadership role in the ICT industry. They named these elements *passionate people*, *raving fans* and *irresistible leadership*. They held as a target, engaging one third of the full system of 1700 personally in the inquiry. The team designed and hosted 17 four-hour “Fusion Forums” where equal numbers of employees from both organisations were invited to share stories.

Through listening to, collecting and distilling core factors from these stories, the team, those engaged in the exercise and through them the wider organisation, began to build a comprehensive picture of the core factors required to bring the three key elements to life. Discovering and sharing the stories unleashed great energy and put the focus on the positive potential of the merger process, rather than on what each side would need to give up in order to come together.

Both the Heliotropic Principle⁴ and the Principle of Enactment come from Appreciative Inquiry practice field. The Heliotropic Principle takes its meaning from the way sunflowers (and all growing things) turn to follow the path of the sun. Our stories can shine a light on positive change that can be made, and they encourage people to turn in that direction too.

The Principle of Enactment might be subtitled “The Gandhi Principle” or *be the change you want to see in the world*. In New Zealand, people used to call this “start in the way you mean to go on”. Tell the stories that encourage you to act in new, open and more courageous ways. Act in ways that help you embody your vision and keep telling stories that will help others to act like that too.

2.1.3 Additional Remarks on the First Wave of Story: Influence

So back to that word *Influence*. For me, this is *the first wave of how we work with stories*. Leaders—and others—want stories to help them create influence: *See it my way, follow me, or our product is better*. There is a power in stories. The question is what we are using that power to do. And here we touch the interlaced practices of ethics, morality and power.

There is no innocent story—although there might be innocent intentions. Every story creates a perspective and asks you to step in and try it on for a while. “Hear me”, “listen and help me figure out what I think”, “this moment meant this”, “I’m

⁴Both of these principles are tenets of the practice field of Appreciative Inquiry. To quote the Center for Appreciative Inquiry (www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net): The Heliotropic or the Anticipatory Principle: *Image Inspires Action*.

Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action. The Enactment Principle: Acting “As If” is Self-Fulfilling: To really make a change, we must “be the change we want to see”. Positive change occurs when the process used to create the change is a living model of the ideal future.

asking for your support”, “I’m like/not like you”, and “here’s something I want to share/help you understand”. And just like any other tool out there—a bulldozer or a hammer or a weapon—it is the intention you use it with that makes all the difference.

We are in the age of influence, and that makes it important to remember that storytelling is also what makes us human. This gift can be used in any way we decide. Our stories can hold us down or they can lift us up. We can choose.

The first wave of how we work with stories focuses on *influence*. This is the most obvious power of story and storytelling, the ability to transmit potent and important ideas and concepts in such a way that people will take action. The two perspectives that fall under this first wave are *story as a leadership practice* and *seeing self and story as positive change agents*. It makes good sense for leaders to get proficient at telling stories, but they must also increase their skills at working with the stories already inherent in the systems they lead. In this way they can be a generative impact on the future story they want to lead into.

2.2 Second Story Wave: Collective Sense and Meaning Making

2.2.1 Story as a Learning Practice and Process Partner

The human mind is organised around stories. We capture our experiences and make sense of the world through the stories that form our lens on reality. Since our knowledge is captured in story form, it makes sense to use stories as one of the fastest mediums for organisational and group learning. With these applications, story can move from an influencer to a game changer.

The next two perspectives are:

- Story as a *learning practice*
- Story as a *process partner*

Story can form the basis of a *systemic learning practice* in these ways:

- As an organisational currency
- As a medium for learning in various configurations
- As a knowledge management tool
- For making collective sense and meaning
- Creating connections and learning pathways

Whether you know it or not, story already *is* your organisational currency. The stories people share about the organisation, their experience of it, the products or services you deal in and the people they work with and serve are creating the culture you work in. These stories not only pattern the space, they create the map of the territory.

Let’s unpack that a bit. The stories being told pattern the space for similar stories to be shared. That means the more negative stories are told, the more negative stories are welcomed in. A complaint culture tends to become a downward spiral, sucking

the life force out of an organisational structure. Or think of an organisation where the prevailing storytelling sets up a “them and us” pattern.

One of my clients was an interisland ferry line connected to the national train service. Historically staff there had come from seafaring families with generations of stories about “management” and the enduring legacy of a dockside strike in the 1950s which had ended badly for everyone. The main Story currency was a negative one. Young people arrived every summer as bright and shiny new workers with plenty of good ideas. How long did they stay that way? My non-scientific staff survey indicated about 3 months. That’s how long energy and motivation can last in a prevailingly negative system.

Story will trump fact (and I don’t use this phrase lightly!). As Peter Drucker⁵ supposedly said: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. So what kind of currency are people around you at work dealing in? Are the stories they are sharing bringing others down or are they intended to lift up the culture?

As both a medium for learning in various configurations and a knowledge management tool, storytelling and story sharing help make the most of organisational wisdom and keep people connected. Early in the 2000s, for example, NASA used stories to spotlight the work of innovative scientists in their geographically widespread organisation. Not content with merely publishing these stories in the usual in-house magazine, they took the bold step of putting stories on a face-to-face basis by taking their featured storytellers on the road and offering interactive sessions.

The more people who interacted with the storytellers of innovation, the more innovation there would be was their thinking. It worked. Storytelling helped to make tacit knowledge visible and shareable. This makes stories one of your key knowledge management tools.

When you focus on what you are learning and how to deepen and integrate it with others, new individual and collective pathways open up. It’s more energising, focusing and enlivening to be on the learning edge together. This in itself creates new pathways of connection. As individuals and small groups make sense together, the collective wisdom of the field rises.

Story is also a powerful process partner. It can:

- Strengthen, clarify and deepen individual and collective processes
- Support change and transformation processes
- Strengthen respect, trust, empowerment and engagement
- Create shared understanding/expand perspectives
- Build capacity for deep listening, witnessing and harvesting
- Create capacity for being in the “not knowing” or Groan Zone⁶ together

⁵But did he really? This is a very popular quote, but there is no citation for it in the literature. However, the “trueness” of it means it has had a long life.

⁶So named by facilitator Sam Kaner and his colleagues. See more about it in his book “Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making”, Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series, 3rd edition, 2014.

Story is a potent partner to other individual and group processes. Since it naturally deepens the connection between participants and allows knowledge sharing, it also strengthens the impact of the process it is used in tandem with.

Process facilitators often talk about the need to create safety so people can engage. (It is important to recognise that it might not be possible to create “safe” space for everyone. However, it IS possible to create “safe enough” space.) Sharing stories can help. Stories of experience in the workplace help us build a picture of what it’s like in different parts of the business. Stories about culture help us to understand why people come at the same thing in different ways. Stories of challenges help us to learn how to meet them; stories of success fill us with energy. These connections build the relationship necessary to approach the turbulent waters of complexity and change with enough “stick-to-it-ness” to stay together even when the going gets tough. This is especially needed when change and transformation are on the menu.

Most of us don’t willingly go into change. Remember those old maps from the Middle Ages with the words: “Here be dragons!” at the edge? When we believed the world to be flat, we also believed we could fall off the edge. There’s some of that belief still in the deepest parts of the human psyche. We know that the journey over the borders to the unknown will affect us in fundamental ways. It could be that we never return. But if we do, we could be forever changed. And none of us is sure exactly what that will mean.

It can be helpful to have a map. In my own work, we often start with a powerful question, which can point the way to the stories needed to add a powerful spark to group process work. In this case, the question provides the *context*, which can lead to different *contents*. Questions act as the doorway to stories, and stories act as the doorway to new and different conversations. This in turn can lead to new collective sense and meaning making as a way of deepening vision and values and exploring the learning edge for individuals, groups and the wider system (Fig. 2).

Sharing stories does what I call “*depthing the field*”. When we listen carefully to each other, witness each other and harvest the gold from our stories together, it is like growing a collective root system. In a healthy forest system, trees share information and nutrients through their root systems. These in turn are connected by the mycelium sheath, which acts as a conduit for the flow and makes trees a community. The same is true for people—when we share a root system, we more easily share information, knowledge and wisdom. We become a learning field. We find some common ground and, from there, the possibility for higher ground. Stories are the mycelium sheath of the human community.

In this world of increasingly one-way talk and ever-shorter soundbites, so many are hungry to be seen and valued. With so much information passing by so rapidly, the capacity for deep listening and witnessing seems to be missing. When we are listened to, we can in turn listen to others. In these times of conflict, building emotional resilience and offering your presence are some of the most important work you can do to strengthen respect, trust, empowerment and engagement.

And finally, working with storytelling can create capacity to be in the “not knowing” together. In participatory practice, the space between divergence and convergence—literally the space between ideas and action—is called *emergence*.

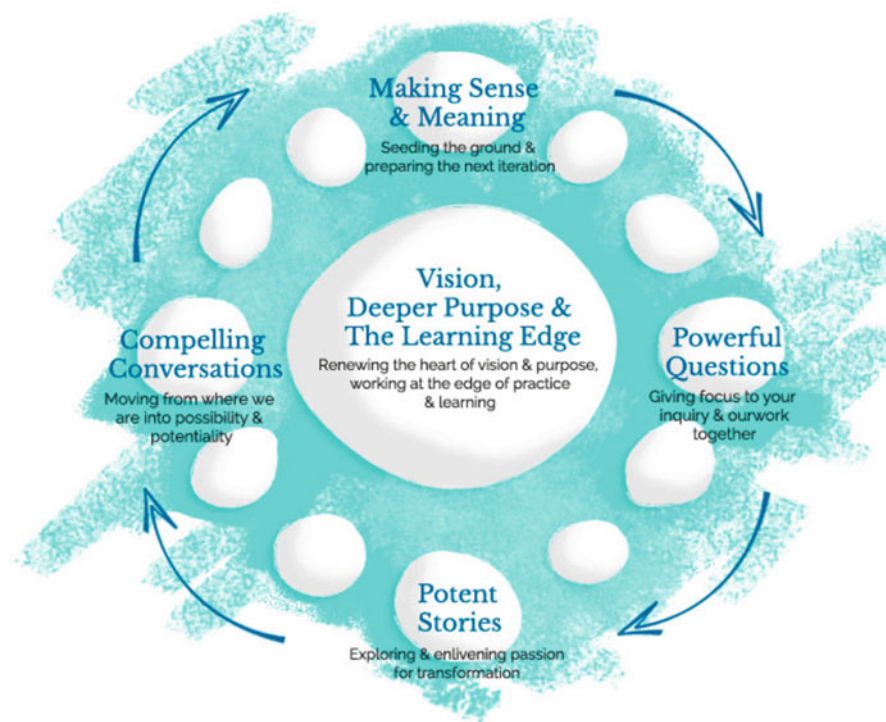


Fig. 2 Story as a process partner—a map (illustrations author’s own)

This space of emergence was named “the Groan Zone” by San Francisco-based facilitator [Sam Kaner](#) and his colleagues, because this foggy place of “not knowing” can appear terrifying, even painful. It *can* make you groan out loud!

But just in case you think you’d never want to go there, it could as easily be called the “Grown Zone” because it is a place of fertile possibility *IF* you can stay in it well together. Stories help us to find the connection and trust enough to keep going together instead of falling apart. They offer us a red thread to keep finding each other in the complexity of daily life and amidst the differences that would otherwise pull us apart.

2.2.2 Collective Sense and Meaning Making: Exploring the Second Wave of Story Further

So many of us are focusing on story and storytelling as a tool for getting the word out there, but I think what comes next in the future story of Story is working with the bounty our stories carry. The next wave is the realisation that *stories are key in creating collective sense and meaning making*. Creating a medium for collective sense and meaning making is a game changer, especially in conflicted systems. Stories are the ideal change partner.

It is time to move beyond the focus on the single hero's journey and look at the journey we can make together. Some of the major tensions in our world can be seen, from my perspective, as the dance between the individual and the collective. On one side we have the inquiry and confrontation of how ME and WE fit together. We can see the fault lines in our communities and the rising call for more control, more rules and regulations, even though we know that humans do best when they are engaged in creating the changes they need to be part of. At the same time, rising environmental and societal challenges are forcing us to consider how we move from a consumer-based paradigm and reclaim citizenship, with both its opportunities and challenges for self- and collective responsibility.

As we negotiate the sharp edges of difference and division, we need to make spaces for finding the common ground that can lead to higher ground. Stories can help us to explore the edges and the heart of these conversations and can encourage us to stay together—in teams, groups, organisations, communities and as a humanity—for long enough to find the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

By their very nature, stories help us to create collective experience. Scientists mapping brain function have seen that listening to stories creates important changes in neurochemistry⁷ that help us bond as humans. The brain releases dopamine—a feel-good chemical that helps us remember with greater accuracy and during the rising arc of a story—the hormone cortisol, which engenders an emotional reaction, even when we know the story is fiction. And finally, during character driven stories, the brain releases oxytocin, the hormone responsible for community feeling and the sense of belonging.

For this reason, stories are especially powerful at helping groups of people make collective sense and meaning together. For the past 7 years, I've been working with a simple but powerful process called *Collective Story Harvest*.⁸ This method revolves around strategic selection of listening themes, aimed at specific sense making.

Using the stories of projects, initiatives, teams, organisations, communities, personal and leadership learning journeys, groups work together to comb through the narrative to find the gold that will take both the storyteller(s) and the group further. In doing so, they build teamwork, the ability to listen between the lines, strategic thinking, energy and commitment. By working together in this way, the learning is more deeply nuanced and considered, both for the group and the storyteller(s).

By combining storytelling and a focused harvesting strategy, this simple method uses targeted listening to dig into the often hidden learning in experience. Choosing a number of "listening arcs" focuses attention on key elements and offers new doorways into the story. The selection of listeners is also a strategic choice, enabling

⁷There are many references to the chemistry of the brain during storytelling. This article by Paul Zak reflects the impact of oxytocin on the brain during narrative: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4445577/>

⁸Collective Story Harvest is a methodology developed by Mary Alice Arthur, Monica Nissen and Toke Paludan Møller as part of the Art of Hosting practice field (www.artofhosting.org).

a diverse group of individuals to add their unique skills or expertise to the group learning.

The second wave of how we work with stories focuses on *collective sense and meaning making*. This is the unsung power of story—its ability to create common ground and, from there, open a doorway to common action. The two perspectives that fall under this second wave are *story as a learning practice* and *story as a process partner*. In group contexts especially, storytelling and storywork can serve as a bridge building between disparate groups and groups connected by mission, but not by function, focus or geography. As the intangible currency of organisation, story is a strategic choice for knowledge transfer, connection and enhanced collective wise action.

2.3 Third Story Wave: Healing and Wholing

2.3.1 Introducing the Third Story Wave

In these days of social media likes, fake news and alternative facts, it's easy to see that influence, and how to wield it is in top of mind for most leaders. For this reason, I see storytelling as one of the key leadership capacities—being able to tell a compelling story about an organisation's mission, about your community's potential or about your own vocation is key to creating a more potent future or even having one! There are two ways story can power your leadership edge.

Next on the list for leaders, however, needs to be StoryWork. Using stories to make collective sense and meaning builds a foundation for common ground. To get to higher ground, however, a leader must be able to shape the stories in the field to be more generative or make a new story to take people in a new direction. The ability to recognise and also work with the stories already alive in your organisation, group or team speaks to the leader's role as *StoryShaper* or *StoryMaker*.⁹

Let's take a look at the final two perspectives:

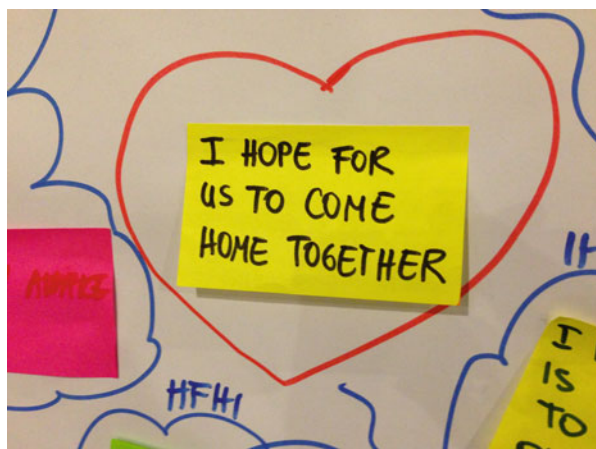
- Story as a resonance tuner
- Story as part of the art of practicing humanity

2.3.2 Stories as a Resonance Tuner

Everyone knows how music can set the tone. Pop music can make you want to sing along. African drum music can make you want to dance. The municipality of Copenhagen even used classical music playing outside the back entrance of the

⁹These are terms I created as part of my work on StoryFields in 2009. For me they have subtly different meanings. A StoryShaper is someone who works with the material inherent in the system to direct it towards a certain vision or goal. A StoryMaker creates a story or narrative arc to move the field in a certain direction. Both of these are leadership skills.

Fig. 3 A workshop wish that indicates a deeper story (photo taken by author)



main train station as a way of keeping young people from loitering. How tastes change over the centuries! The important thing to remember about music is that the more you hear it, the more you resonate with it. You literally *attune* to the tune you are hearing.

Stories also carry a resonance. Stories of challenges overcome can make us feel uplifted. Stories of violence and abuse can make us go into fear. Stories of injustice can ignite a fire in us for change. That's not surprising, considering that neuroscientists¹⁰ have tracked the brain patterning of story listeners and storytellers. When we are listening to a story that compels us, our brains light up in the same way the storyteller's brain lights up. We are literally—both from a mental and physical perspective—experiencing the story at the same time as the teller and the other listeners. This is called *mirroring*.

*Neural coupling*¹¹ is the name for the way the brain can be stimulated to take on the ideas and experience within the story as its own. Scientists have also told us that one of the reasons stories are more impactful than facts is that they activate many more parts of the brain, including the motor, sensory and frontal cortexes.

The bad news about this, from a leadership perspective, is that when negative stories continue to circulate, they begin to create a negative resonance that spirals out. The good news is positive stories, as we learned previously, release the very hormones that create a sense of community and intimacy. Good stories we share together make us want to be part of community. They make us want to share more.

Stories speak to our experiences but also to our longings, like this sticky note (Fig. 3) from a woman in the circle at the start of a challenging merger process in the charity Habitat for Humanity: *I hope for us to come home together*, they are

¹⁰There is plenty written on this, but a good place to start is Jonathon Gottshall's 2012 book "The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human", First Mariner Books.

¹¹Greg J Stephens, rize Universiteit Amsterdam, "Speaker-Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication" in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107 (32):14425-30 August 2010.

placeholders for our fears, wishes and dreams. For this reason, they act like a tuning fork, vibrating us into the resonance of the story we are in. Story acts as a resonance tuner by:

- Setting the tone
- Building resonance
- Shifting the tone/recalibrating systems
- Using harmonics

You might say a story is the quickest link between two people. We have only to look around us in a political sense to see that the stories that continue to be shared set the tone, whether they are true or not.

2.3.3 Leadership Stories Build a Resonance Throughout the Wider System

People continue to look to leaders (and by this I mean leaders at every level and capacity) to see how to navigate the system they are in. What you *say* is equally as important as what you *do*. When these two align, it is called integrity. Some also call it authenticity.

In the same way, stories can also be used to shift the resonance or recalibrate the system. To their chagrin, many leaders have found out that facts cannot trump a compelling story—only a story can trump another story. If you want to change the course of the system you are leading or living in, you need to find the compelling story that will help you gain traction to shift the system.

The [Corrymeela Peace Centre](http://www.corrymeela.org)¹² in Northern Ireland delivers some fantastic training on how to work with long-term conflict situations. Their iceberg model shows how conflict escalates and also what the stages of de-escalation are. And like any iceberg, nine tenths of the challenge is under the waterline. What's under the waterline in conflicts is *narrative*. Long after the direct actors in a conflict have come to resolution, the conflict can still continue because the vicarious actors—all those people attached to those directly involved—keep telling the same old story.

And just like a good piece of music is rich and engaging, stories can be used to create harmonics in the system—to spotlight or pinpoint something you want to value or enhance in the moment it is happening or needed. When I'm working with groups, I call that “speaking to the thought bubble”, and I imagine myself telling the story I'm sharing directly to the invisible thought or question hovering over people's heads in that moment. Leaders have the platform to tend to system harmonics.

2.3.4 Stories as Part of the Art of Practicing Humanity

Storytelling is what makes us uniquely human, and it seems we can't function without them. Throughout our human history, we've used them to share knowledge, to capture our learning and experience, to make sense and meaning of the world and

¹²Corrymeela Peace Centre www.corrymeela.org

to test our ideas about what it means to be a good human and a valuable member of society. I call stories “the library of humanity”.

Everything we have ever known still lives on in our stories—and much that we’ve forgotten. I remember reading in an old copy of *National Geographic* about a scientist studying volcanos in Hawaii, who’d hit a dead end. He finally asked elders there about their old stories and found precisely the missing piece in a legend about the fire goddess Pele.

Seeing story in this perspective begs the question about what part of the library we’re focusing on at the moment. Perhaps we’ve been playing on the fear shelf or in the competition section for too long. Perhaps we’ve gotten lost in the consumer periodicals or we’ve been rereading the scarcity manual too many times. Maybe it’s time to focus on other stories.

2.3.5 How Can We Awaken More Humanity in Our Structures and Organisations?

As our societies face increasing complexity, they are also facing a growing wave of social isolation. The workplace is still a major meeting point for humanity, and most people spend more time at work than they do with their own families. That makes a sense of connection, belonging and purpose at work increasingly important. Employee engagement depends on it.

What does it mean to be human these days? Story is—at its very nature—about the art and practice of being human. It supports our awakening humanity by:

- Creating shared understanding/expanding perspectives
- Welcoming and engaging diversity
- Building bridges of empathy and commitment
- Creating a more resilient foundation through strengthened relationships
- Encouraging self-responsibility
- Creating a bigger now
- Reclaiming the fuller truth of our own stories
- Meeting in our humanity and sharing what it is to be human

Stories and storytelling are a fundamental building block for creating shared understanding. We use them all the time with colleagues, especially in the process of acculturation of a new staff person. The anecdotes we share help us to navigate the workplace and make sense of the codes of behaviour that lurk beneath the surface. Just as a traveller needs translation help in a new country with a new language, employees support each other to learn about local working customs by sharing stories.

Stories can be the bridge builder across the divides and a way for welcoming and engaging diversity. Especially in global organisations with diverse ethnicities, races and languages, storytelling can help to create better teamwork by creating more tolerance and acceptance around different ways of engaging with the same issues. It can also highlight and make useful unique ways of dealing with challenges or creating innovation.

Remember that there are multiple definitions of “culture” operating in the workplace. Each person arrives with their own unique story lens on the world, which is impacted by the culture they were raised in and operate in now. Each organisation also has its own unique cultural mix, the “how we do it around here” that makes it recognisable. On the way to embedding storytelling in the workplace as part of the culture, it needs to be used intentionally and with supportive, well-hosted process so that there is “safe enough” space for sharing and so that good listening and sense making is encouraged.

In these times of complexity and ongoing change, creating resilient community in the workplace is a top priority. As those of us who have lived in the earthquake zone can attest (and this is my experience after 30 years in New Zealand!), a resilient community is not the community with more resources but the more connected community. Creating spaces for people to meet and share their stories—of work, of learning, of life—is an important ingredient in strengthened relationships and community that lasts. It is creating and tending the connected community.

In my early 20s, I had a 3-month internship at IBM’s International Education Centre in La Hulpe, Belgium. I was curious to find out what it was like inside of this renowned organisation. I remember many of the people there told me they valued their collegial community and the stories they shared above all else, even more than the many resources and opportunities of such a global enterprise. Some had even left only to return again, saying: “I just couldn’t find the kind of conversations I have here anywhere else!”

Stories also create what Open Space founder Harrison Owen¹³ calls “a bigger now”. They create an extended present moment, where time stops: an opportunity to take a look at a snapshot of life in the midst of the ever-flowing river and make sense of it and a little momentary pause in proceedings in which to rest and reflect. Organisationally, this is a great gift. To be able to consult our collegial and human experience in story form makes it possible to alter the focus; gain new, fresh perspectives; and be in *this* moment, rather than in the past or future.

As human beings, we tell ourselves stories continually. Some of stories remain consistent—even stuck—while others get reedited. If we let them, and sometimes in the light of someone else’s listening, stories can help us to claim—maybe even reclaim—our understanding of an experience. Perhaps the truth of our experience might be quite different from someone else’s experience of the same moment or a deeper truth that only reveals itself over time. The longer we live with and work with a particular story, the more nuanced it can become and the more it sheds light into the past and offers a new perspective on the future.

¹³Harrison Owen, “Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology”, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1997.

As Christina Baldwin¹⁴ says: “As you change the story you’re living in the now, you change your expectations of your own capacity in the future. Ask yourself: *Are we telling the version of this that is foundational for where we want to go?* The next level is the social field of story—first we take our experience and make meaning out of it, then we take our social experience to make connection”.

And finally, sharing stories help us to meet in our humanity and inquire into what it is to be human. All of us have challenges. All of us have coping strategies. All of us have hopes and dreams, fears and frailties. Listening to others helps us to make sense of the wonderful or frightening mess we find ourselves in. Hearing how others cope encourages self-responsibility and action. And this, in turn, helps us to work well together.

2.3.6 The Third Story Wave: Closing Remarks

Both of these last two perspectives of story—*Story as a resonance tuner* and *Story as part of the art of practicing humanity* are part of the last wave. After influence and collective sense and meaning making, what is the next level of the future story of Story? The third wave of story lies in healing and wholing.

Winston Churchill famously said: “We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us”. After more than 20 years of working with groups and after supporting hundreds of institutions, large and small, I’ve become aware of the fragmentation, stress and even trauma that institutional and societal structures can impose on those who live and work in them.

When I moved to New Zealand in my mid-twenties, I worked in the same team as Andrew Stevens, one of the last people who had spent their entire career at the New Zealand Wool Board. During that time he’d had many different roles, and many different managers, but always a Wool Board family to come back to. Those were still the days where you could smoke in the office and have a cheap, hot meal in the staff cafeteria at lunchtime. I was there when Andrew retired, but I’d moved on before the Wool Board itself became a thing of the past.

I found that same sense of “family” network at the New Zealand Tourism Department when I arrived there. The New Zealand Tourism Department was one of the oldest national tourism functions in the world. Many colleagues who had joined the Department as cadets at aged 17 were now in their fifties and still at work there. But even then, things were becoming much more unpredictable. There were no longer secure career paths into foreign service and life-long rising through the ranks. When sudden and continual restructuring became the norm, trauma was the result. Change fatigue became a constant organisational companion.

In the case of regional, multinational or global organisations—like aid agencies or the European institutions—trauma is multiplied by the fractal nature of the

¹⁴As quoted in her interview during the Story the Future Online Summit, September 2018 (www.storythefuture.com). See her excellent book: “Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives Through the Power and Practice of Story”, New World Library, 2005/More about Christina’s work: www.peerspirit.org

StoryField. People carry their own individual and family traumas, of course, but if in their role they also represent their country (and thereby their national traumas), or the trauma of a specific group, then this also needs to be managed while dealing with a variety of cultural divides and at the same time working inside a structure that can create traumatising impacts to individuals through their very size and bureaucracy.

The trauma inflicted by our structures is exacerbated by the idea that people at work should focus on the work and leave their emotions and private lives—essentially the identity that makes them human—at home. This is a concept that, in itself, leads to fragmentation. What suffers is the potential to be a whole person operating within a context that encourages wholeness and holistic or systemic thinking.

At the micro level, I've noticed that when any group meets, first healing is needed. This need may be expressed overtly—as in “Now I need you to listen to me!”—or covertly: the group is uncomfortable, there is something unspoken in the room, and people feel stuck or trapped. Either way, the need is like a threshold the group must step over in order to do good work together and to stay together long enough to do it. Storytelling can take a group over the threshold, enabling them create enough understanding to form the basis of a new conversation and, from there, wiser action. The understanding and community feeling that arises from storytelling can build the foundation for a future.

With so much fragmentation in our societies and organisations, coming back together again—*wholing*—is what we now need to explore. If we truly want to galvanise the potential in our organisations, if we want more energy and commitment in our teams and if we want to share resources and have more vibrancy in our communities, then we need ways to bring the pieces together again or introduce them in the first place!

This third wave of the future story of Story—working with storytelling as a medium for healing and wholing—is not an end in itself, but it is necessary. It takes us back around the cycle again, this time to influencing with integrity and on again to making new sense and meaning together that will take us to the next level of wholeness. It is time for the new paradigm leader—the Story Activist, the one who uses storytelling and storywork to help create a more flourishing future—to get to work.

The third wave of how we work with stories focuses on *healing and wholing*. This is the most hidden power of story and storytelling, the ability to transmute the conflict, pain or trauma of the past into strength for the future. The two perspectives that fall under this third wave are *story as a resonance tuner* and *story as part of the art of practicing humanity*. With the ever-increasing complexity and conflict in human society, it makes sense to pay attention to how we can clear the way for more generative co-working on our most challenging issues.

3 A Closing Thought

Story is a key component in organisational life—and in human life within organisations!—so it makes sense to become proficient at working with it, good at spotting it in action and wise in its application. The benefits to the wise use of story are more effective, connected and cohesive individuals, groups and full systems. Story is one of the major “attractor factors” in the working world, whether it is packaged as vision, mission, values, ways of working or culture. It is alive and well, and every organisational system is a mirror of its impact.

It might be said that every story takes you on a journey, whether that is a complete hero’s journey into life’s biggest challenges and beyond or a small step towards another individual or into personal understanding. To go beyond merely surviving, to thriving and even further to flourishing means taking hold of your story, challenging your perspectives and riding the waves.

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whilst putting us back into a relation where we see the water and the air, not as fixed and fact. And in so doing, we find a place for the anger.

The second daughter of hope is courage. Re-authoring work provides a set of courageous practices that invite deep connectedness, dignity and aliveness. Through collective meaning-making grounded in significant moments of real-life experiences, a multiplicity of alternative/counter futures emerges from this work. Re-authoring work dares to transport us, not as mere spectators but as authors and co-authors of our world as we co-create moments that transform our past, present and future.

May we have enough anger and courage to dare to imagine and work towards a future and indeed re-authoring futures that would transform our organisations and our world.

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