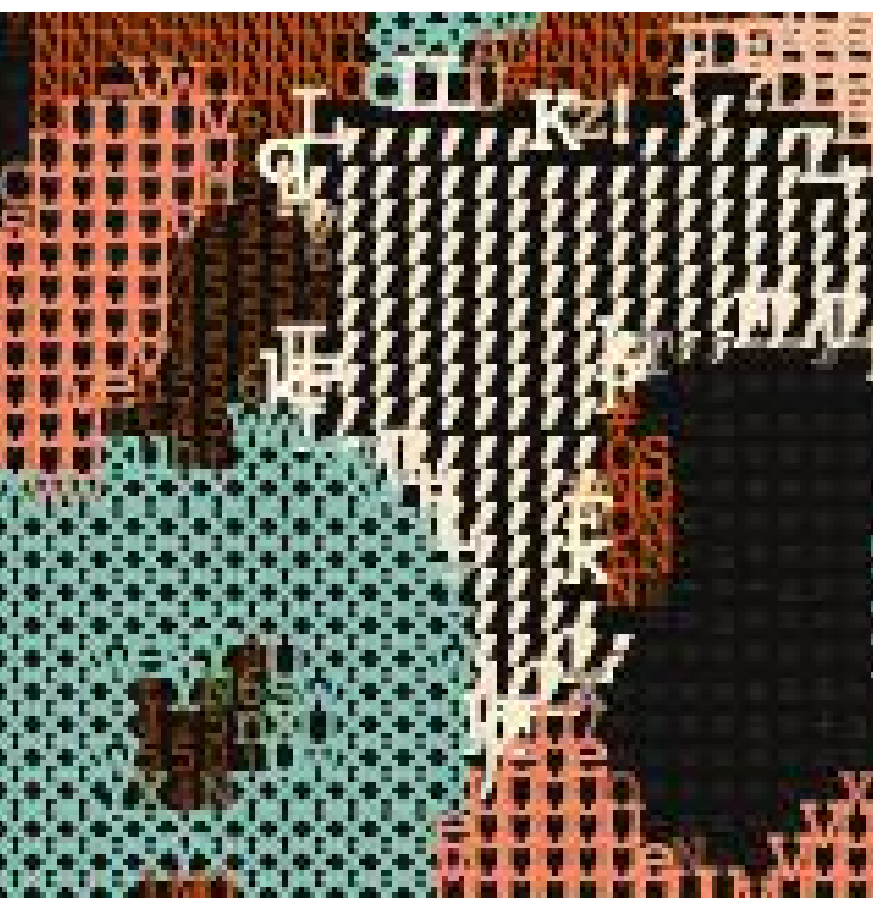




COLLECTIVE  
change lab

# Storytelling as meaning-making



SYSTEMS  
STORYTELLING  
INITIATIVE

Nearly a year ago, we set off on a journey to discover how [storytelling can help us transform social systems](#). We had a hunch that stories of heroes and super-charged change efforts were not serving the social sector well, and that somehow, the way we were telling stories of change was holding us back from creating real change.

Prior to this project, we had experienced disillusionment with collective change efforts that created short-term incremental successes while long-term transformation remained elusive. We had witnessed how deep-seated narratives were prone to surfacing even when groups experienced small wins, often creating subsequent divisions and setbacks. We felt a call to, as [Ella Saltmarshe writes](#), “develop new processes of collective storytelling to help us navigate these turbulent and polarizing times.”

We knew that we didn’t have answers and set out to find fellow travellers who could help us make sense of what we were seeing. We were joined in a Community of Practice (CoP) by CCL’s Systems Storytellers, a group of ten intrepid storytellers from diverse cultures, geographies and genres. We learned quickly that we would have to go slow to go fast and that we would need to be emergent and present to understand the real power of stories.

Our journey is ongoing, but we would like to share our emerging learnings in this compendium.

## LEARNING 1: STORYTELLING IS ARGUABLY HUMANITY’S OLDEST SOCIAL CHANGE TOOL

Early in our journey, we learned to navigate by the stars. One of our CoP members, Nayantara Sen, introduced us to a metaphor that helped clarify how storytelling fits into the broader genres of narrative and cultural change. She quoted her colleagues [Jeff Chang, Liz Manne, and Erin Potts](#) saying that stories are like individual stars, narratives are constellations of stories, and cultures are like huge, expanding galaxies. Individual stories by themselves cannot drive change, but when they are linked together, they can immerse us in new narratives that can shift culture in profound ways.



*Stories are like stars.  
Narratives are a  
collection of stories in  
the same way that  
constellations are a  
collection of stars. A  
culture, then, is like a  
galaxy.*

**- Jeff Chang,  
Liz Manne &  
Erin Potts**

Storytelling is humanity’s oldest “technology” to create social change. Alain de Botton writes, “The difference between hope and despair is a different way of telling stories from the same facts.” When we narrate our histories and activate our imaginations, we foster a process of collective meaning-making. Meaning-making is the way we selectively choose information, sequence it, bound it (identify a beginning, middle & end), and then use this interpretation to identify courses of action. Most importantly, when we tell stories together over time, we activate collective agency, the ability for groups to cohere and create a shared future.

However, in a world which has become globalized and dominated by a single economic model, a specific type of storytelling has become dominant. Modern, capitalistic storytelling often features linear storylines and heroic actors overcoming problems. This has become the dominant way of crafting stories in many industries and sectors, including the nonprofit/social sector.

## LEARNING 2: STORYTELLING IS FOR SENSE-MAKING

Heroic story structures are often used to influence and “sell” rather than cohere: they position individuals and organizations as powerful agents who address social challenges through single solutions. These stories reinforce existing power narratives about who and how social change should happen, ultimately limiting the set of options available for systems change.

Systems approaches require many stakeholders, often with differing viewpoints, to come together over long periods of time to affect change. Heroic, linear narratives are particularly dangerous for complex, systemic issues because they prioritize single solutions, often from privileged actors. We need to revitalize Storytelling practices that keep groups together while learning: considering viewpoints, testing and experimenting, evaluating, learning from failure and trying again.

## LEARNING 3: STORYTELLING IS ABOUT PRACTICE AS MUCH AS PRODUCT

In our jobs and professional lives as storytellers, we are often (and almost exclusively) focused on the end product. For each of us, these products are different: documentary films, books, short stories, music lessons, case studies, visual artforms, poetry, podcasts, strategic narratives, and journal articles. These products are invariably crafted to impart specific information and drive a specific agenda.

However, as our CoP progressed, we became attuned to the work that we were doing together: experiencing storytelling as a practice rather than a product.

We found respite in focusing each month on the process of storytelling itself - contributing ideas, experiencing each other's work, reveling in the use of language and metaphor, and offering personal reflections. Through this process, we - slowly and surely - moved toward greater understanding of storytelling as a way of making sense of complexity. Storytelling helps us to understand different parts of a system, including their past, present and future. It is a practice that allows groups to make meaning together over time.

# LEARNING RECAP

## Storytelling is:

1

... arguably humanity's oldest social change tool

2

... for sense-making

3

... about practice as much as product

In our CoP, we revealed **four purposes of storytelling**, all of which focus on meaning-making:

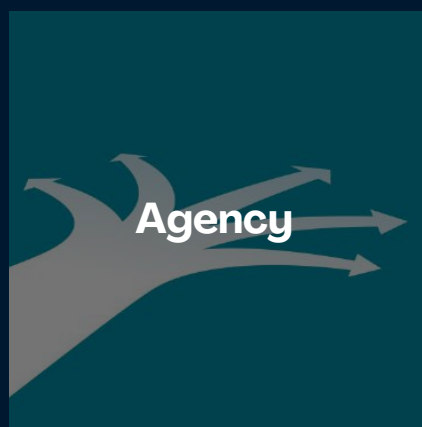
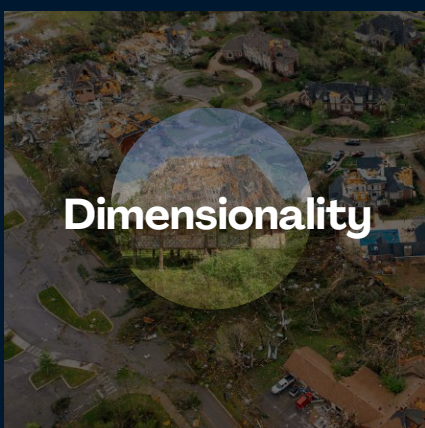
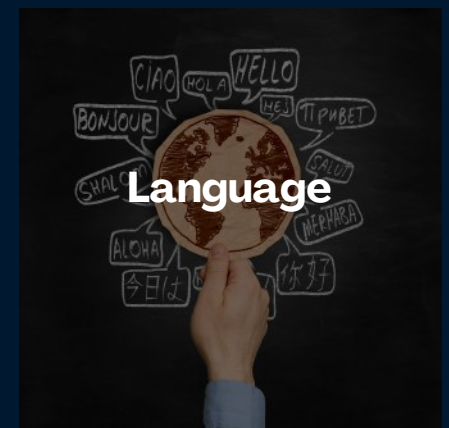
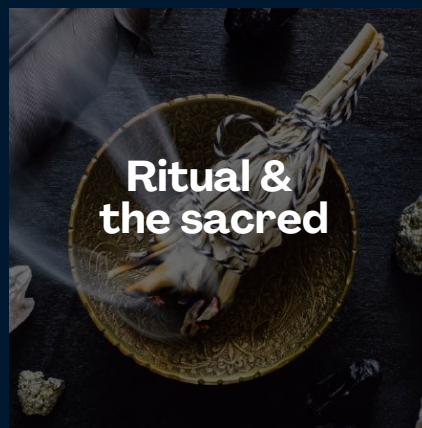
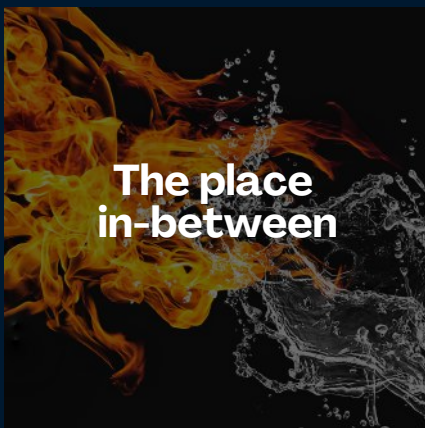
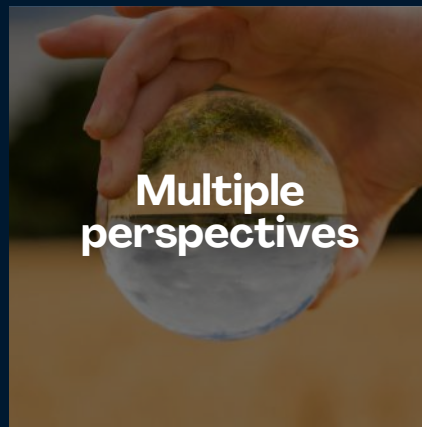


- **Storytelling is Connection:** When we tell stories together, we become cognitively and physiologically attuned to each other. Our brains and bodies were built for storytelling in community.
- **Storytelling is Understanding:** When we listen to stories told by others, we become mentally and physically receptive to understanding diverse experiences and perspectives.
- **Storytelling is Power:** Power is reinforced and transformed by stories. We choose protagonists, sequence, timeframes, and other elements that advance certain behaviors and perspectives over others.
- **Storytelling is Healing:** Our individual and group histories are narrations etched over memories. We can change these narratives to heal individually and collectively.



# Emerging Themes

The themes below include emerging thinking, questions we are exploring, as well as things to try in your own storytelling practice. In our next phase, we will be testing storytelling as a meaning-making practice with several collectives who have agreed to journey with us. There is still much to learn, but we look forward to experimenting with others and sharing these experiences with those who journey alongside us.



## THEME ONE

# AUTHORSHIP

“Authorship is important because the author has power. As the author, you decide what to foreground and what to background, how to tie the events together, the narrative that will be told. There’s a lot of personal work you also have to do.”



### Why is authorship important?

A clear message from CCL’s Systems Storytellers is that authorship has many facets. Authorship is not just who tells the story but which perspectives are included, the proximity of the storyteller to the story, as well as the editing and crafting of the story. Authorship is also linked to the motivations and intentions of the storyteller, requiring a closer look at empathy, trauma and healing.

**Become part of the story you are telling:** Storytellers with lived experience can collaborate with those authors who have intersecting stories and become an authentic part of a group to tell their stories. Many of CCL’s Systems Storytellers have spent several years with communities and groups to become part of the story that they are telling. One of them described a profound journey that she had undertaken: “The journey really changed me. I came to the realization that I had been afraid to look at the past because it’s so full of trauma and pain for Black people. At some point during this journey, though, I was able to move through the fear. What I saw was that it wasn’t just a history of pain and trauma. It was a history full of life and humanity. I ended up searching for my own roots as a part of this story, and I found a great great grandfather I never knew much about.”

**Edit and craft with humility:** Since there is such power in storytelling, the editing and crafting process should be approached with humility, requiring a significant level of engagement and collaboration. One of CCL’s Systems Storytellers expressed the importance of this process: “There’s a fine line between editing and authorship. When do you cross that line when a story is no longer someone’s authentic story because we edited in that dramatic arc we want to see but that wasn’t really there in how they perceive their story?” Another one reflected, “How can we leave room for authenticity without dictating that certain norms or rules of storytelling must be met in order for the story to be accepted?”

**Stories in service of healing:** Importantly, the discussion led us to the related issues of empathy, trauma and healing. We discussed how systems storytelling can be in service of healing rather than retriggering those who have lived through traumatic experiences. We also considered whether systems storytelling is better served by empathizing with a single story or more broadly comprehending a range of perspectives. A CCL Systems Storyteller noted: “There’s a debate around the prosocial effects of narrative. Some believe when we prioritize empathy, we end up making how a system works more invisible because we individualize the stories. Others believe that telling multiple points of view is where the real prosocial effect happens - that’s how we get a better view of systems, by stitching together multiple points of view.”



## THEME ONE

# AUTHORSHIP



## Tara's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- What happens when a storyteller becomes part of the story they are telling?
- How might storytellers reflect on their inner journeys while they are telling stories?
- How can an author's insider/outsider status serve as an important distinction to explore for systems storytelling?
- How can authors' stories' integrity be preserved, even when edited for dramatic effect?
- How can we allow stories to remain intact, rather than merely as an exercise in extracting information?

### Things to try:

- Spend time thinking about who holds the stories in your system. Invite these storytellers into a practice of storytelling.
- Engage as an "insider/outsider", taking the time to build an authentic relationship with all storytellers before attempting to tell a story.
- Edit and craft stories with humility, ensuring that all storytellers have a chance to provide input into the process.
- Create healing spaces for storytelling, preparing safe spaces for storytellers who may have triggering experiences and feel the power to not tell their stories if they so choose.

I started "Into the Depths" with National Geographic when I saw a photo of a group of primarily Black female scuba divers at the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington, DC. I thought they looked like superheroes! The caption said they were a part of a group called Diving With a Purpose, and that they were diving to search for and help document lost slave shipwrecks. I was floored and immediately wanted to be a part of this work.

I am a storyteller by trade, and thought I would mainly tell stories about these women and men divers. But then this idea grew in my mind of giving voice to those who are lost. 1.8 million lives were lost in the crossing. That's 1.8 million stories that have not been told. I also thought about the stories of the communities and descendants around the world who were connected to the wrecked ships. I wondered what happens when Black storytellers are part of crafting these narratives and thinking about ways to tell this story?

The journey really changed me. I came to the realization that I had been afraid to look at the past because it's so full of trauma and pain for Black people. I had divorced myself from that past because I was afraid of stepping into that pain and trauma. At some point during this journey, though, I was able to move through the fear. What I saw was that it wasn't just a history of pain and trauma. It was a history full of life and humanity. I ended up searching for my own roots as a part of this story, and I found a great great grandfather I never knew much about.

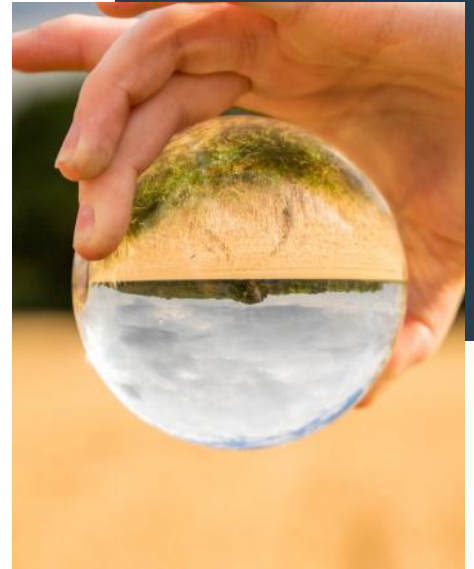
National Geographic and I turned this experience into a 6-part audio podcast called [Into the Depths](#). And I wrote a cover story about the journey for the March issue of Nat Geo magazine. There are discussion questions and a toolkit for groups to listen to the podcasts together and discuss them afterwards on Nat Geo's Into the Depths microsite. As we begin to do promo work for the podcast series, members of the public have begun to respond in tremendous and supportive ways. And some have questions. One woman left a comment saying she thinks we talk too much about race as a culture. She objected to the fact that we say the divers are Black. I sat with her comment for a while, and I wondered how do I respond to people who think we've talked about this enough already and it's time to move on?

And I would now say that we actually haven't talked about race in ways that move us through the shame, horror, guilt, anger and other paralyzing emotions nearly enough. And I would say that there is power in bringing more voices to the table, in looking at this monumental event in our history with an unflinching eye and in doing so with the intent to acknowledge, to honor, to heal. This is the possibility of the work of recovering slave shipwrecks. This work helps give us the tools we need in order to create a just and equitable future.

## THEME TWO

# MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

“Entire narratives can be shaped by one perspective. That perspective may not be wrong, but it is singular - whereas the reality is narratives are quilts of stories.”



### Why are multiple perspectives important?

In the CoP, we explored how multiple perspectives might be “stitched together” to create “quilts” of stories rather than simply telling a single story from an organizational perspective. We contemplated whether a series of small stories told from many different perspectives might have more power than a single story told deeply from a single perspective.

**Perspective as power:** Authorship and perspective are deeply intertwined. The stories that get told, and the perspectives they amplify, are a representation of what is privileged in a system. Systems stories can help us navigate complexity by featuring multiple perspectives and revealing perspectives that may have less exposure. One of CCL’s Systems Storytellers noted, “Telling stories is a tool of power – a way to revise our collective understanding of history and what happened, to whom, why, and with what effects. How do we give a wider group of people the power to construct history through story and a different perspective and point of view on what happened?”

**Moving beyond heroes:** Constructing stories with multiple perspectives means moving beyond singular heroes to “ensemble casts” of change agents. This can allow entirely new construction of old narratives that are holding us back from seeing the whole story. One of CCL’s Systems Storytellers described his own life experience related to growing up in South Africa with the narrative of Nelson Mandela: “As a young black South African, people think Mandela saved me, that I was born into freedom. But if you ask my mom, our parents saved Mandela. They stood in front of bullets and pressured the international community to impose sanctions. Beyond stories of heroic individuals, our storytelling traditions need to branch out and offer different perspectives.”

**Nature as a perspective:** In many traditions of storytelling, non-human characters are given an equal voice as human characters. By elevating stories from nature, we can ensure that these perspectives are not sidelined as we envision systemic changes. One of CCL’s Systems Storytellers commented, “Western storytelling is often anthropocentric. In Indigenous stories we include perspectives from those things labeled as “inanimate”. In the Mohawk creation story, all of the food is given a responsibility to nourish human beings because we are the youngest siblings of creation. So when I was coaching some food system innovators, I asked them, “Did you ask the food what it wants?”



## THEME TWO

# MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES



## Nico's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- How can we tell stories with multiple perspectives?
- What do we gain, and what do we lose, by adding multiple perspectives to a story?
- How can we preserve a multiplicity of stories while also weaving them together to create systems stories?
- How can empathy be encouraged rather than discouraged through multiple perspectives?
- Can we create multi-perspective stories that are compelling, clear and full of meaning?

*In 2016 we were invited to conduct a documentary film workshop for teenage girls in a safe house in Colombia. These girls have experienced horrific things - rape, abuse, violence, drugs. Yet, despite the brutality of their childhood experience, their innocence and humor made us admire them and inspired us to make a film. Together with them, we understood that they live in a circle of violence that gets perpetuated across generations. The question the film holds is, is it possible to break these cycles and imagine a brighter future?*

*It was a long process before we decided to make a film. We tried different ways of telling this story at the beginning. In the workshops with them we understood the power of imagination to access truths that would otherwise remain hidden. So when we came up with the mechanism for the film of having the girls make up stories about an imaginary girl, Alis, we knew it could work. It's hard to believe they created these stories on the spot and could make them so believable.*

*The girls' stories are stories of pain and marginalization. But they laugh, dance, and release emotions. They imagine they can be someone else in the future, that another life is possible. Will they make it? We don't know. But in our world full of crises, they give us a message: the only way to build a new reality is to imagine it first.*

### Things to try:



- Try "stitching together" multiple stories when crafting stories of social change.
- Go horizontal rather than vertical. Rather than tell a single story deeply, try telling many small stories that combine together and show the breadth of an issue.
- Look for the hidden or "person on the street" perspectives. Lift up these voices in your storytelling, even if it goes against the traditional narrative.
- Give non-human characters - nature, food, technology - a voice. Consider their perspectives in the stories that you are telling.

## THEME THREE

# STORYTELLING ELEMENTS

“As social change-makers, crafting stories gives us control over narrating reality and allows us to shape how meaning is created.”



### Why are storytelling elements important?

In one of our sessions together, we drew from fiction writing and discussed the structure of stories. Certain structures have been over-emphasized in Western storytelling, such as Freytag's Triangle and Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey Model. We considered other storytelling structures, such as the Bhagavad Gita, which offer different story structures and even disrupt genres and their boundaries. We then explored a “sandbox” of seven story elements that we can play with for telling systems change stories.

**Elements are more than entertainment:** The way we tell a story allows us to find ways to make meaning out of a story. We can play with elements - such as Protagonists & Characters; Backstory & History; Point of View & Framing; World-Building; Time Management; Plot & Story Arc; Conflict & Tension - to find ways to shift our perceptions of reality. One of CCL's Systems Storytellers described it this way: “When you're manipulating the clay of a story, you can find ways to intervene in narratives. When you bridge from story to narrative to culture, you are working with the wet clay of what it takes to make meaning out of the world.”

**Conflict and energy are key:** Fiction writers are skilled at creating stories that keep the audience engaged. This is often a function of conflict, which creates energy in a story. One of CCL's Systems Storytellers considered how conflict can be used to drive energy: “Flashes of conflict” tend to drive towards revelation. How can we depict the energy around moments of conflict? How can we play with the depiction and release of this energy to show that something has shifted in the way the group (or characters) function pre- and post-conflict. Also, what happens when we depict years and years of simmering discontent?”

**Stories give us permission to reimagine:** The craft of storytelling also gives us permission to reimagine both the past and the future. It is a “sandbox” for reality. One of CCL's Systems Storytellers commented, “When you enter into a fictional storytelling experience, writers call this 'suspension of disbelief'. It's the idea that when you enter into a fictional story, you only need a couple of seconds before you start believing the world that doesn't exist, it's an imagined world. The rules of the universe are bendable and the on-ramp to believing something that is not yet true can be such a liberating experience, it's healing. The kind of permission it gives us, the kind of release that it gives us is really pretty incredible.”

## THEME THREE

# STORYTELLING ELEMENTS



## Nayantara's Story



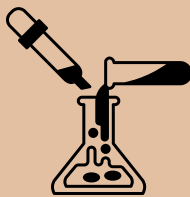
### Questions we are asking:

- How can we work with the elements of storytelling to shape meaning and narrative together?
- How do we reconsider who are story characters and how they find one another in a story?
- How do we use storytelling elements to revisit perspective & point-of-view?
- How do we play with experiential and embodied aspects of stories?
- How do we 'break the binaries' of good and bad?

*The well-trod story structure of Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey is a story in three acts that centers around the protagonist's call to adventure and eventual ascension to a higher plane. There's the exposition / character development, followed by an inciting incident that leads to rising action and a climax, and then a falling action or resolution of some sort.*

*How do we abandon this structure? It doesn't serve us in terms of more complex systemic storytelling. What are all the different ways we can imagine stories if we are not constrained by the frameworks of these two particular men? Indigenous, BIPOC, and diaspora communities have incredible story structures that just aren't given as much visibility and as much power as they should.*

### Things to try:



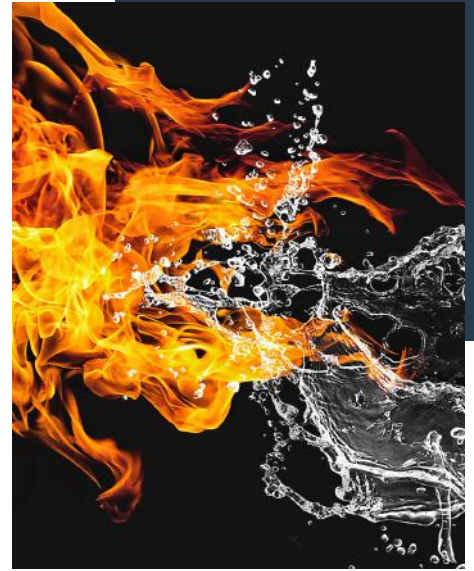
- Revisit your story structure and consider a different option than the Western models.
- Consider where conflict lies in your story. See if there are conflicts and tensions that provide new sources of meaning and action.
- Identify multiple protagonists rather than a single hero. Create a "cast of characters" including community members, activists, families, and students rather than the "stock characters" of founders, funders and politicians.
- Include the "backstory" in your story, narrating the story from several generations past, rather than starting with the founding date of an organization or collective.
- Read, watch, and listen to stories from different cultures and genres. You will likely find sources of inspiration!

*When you're manipulating the clay of a story, you can find ways to intervene in narratives. There are other things that allow you to actually do narrative strategy work too, but when you bridge from story to narrative to culture, you actually are working with the wet clay of what it takes to make meaning out of the world. As social change-makers, crafting stories gives us control over narrating reality and allows us to shape how meaning is created.*



## THEME FOUR

# THE PLACE IN BETWEEN



“The in-between state is a place of fractured identity for many. Indigenous leaders talk of walking in two worlds. When we come into places with people who don’t share our worldview, we have to fracture ourselves and put our authentic selves to one side to be able to relate. But instead of choosing sides, we can also think about the space in-between as the space where healing happens. Where we can dance with two ideas until a third presence emerges.”

### What is ‘the place in between’?

Several CCL System Storytellers operate in an “in between” place in their personal and professional lives. These spaces are cultural (Western and Indigenous, North and South), social (immigration between countries, living across borders), disciplinary (architect and filmmaker, fiction writer and strategist, artist and academic), and linguistic (multilingual, polyglot), among others. We discussed that these relational places - where elements of difference meet - can be fraught, but are among the most generative and imaginative for systems and storytelling.

**The place between extremes:** We discussed binaries and how polar extremes are the place of judgment and exclusion. A CCL System Storyteller related this to the political environment in the United States: “Either you're good or you're bad. The good is often the force that wins out, and the bad loses. We talked a little bit about this idea of cancel culture and what happens if the stories were more in the middle, which is how most people are. What could be shifted if there wasn't such an opposition between the two forces?”

**A space for transformation:** We also considered the in-between place as a space for transformation, where entirely new things (thoughts, things, truths) can emerge. One of CCL’s System Storytellers described this in chemical terms: “In chemistry, the process of nucleation is when you bring different elements together (like hydrogen and oxygen) and you get something else that has completely different properties than either element on its own. It’s an entire phase change. Each element is not just additive, it’s transformational. So there’s the place in between. But there’s also the composite that is completely different with each added element in its whole essential meaning. That’s a different mental model of what systems change storytelling can be.”

**A space for creativity and play:** Finally, we were encouraged to think about in-between places as spaces for creativity and play, since there are fewer rules and less expectations. One of CCL's Systems Storytellers explained, “There’s something inherently playful about narrative. The space in between, the ability to play with ideas. Music as a form turns up the penchant for play. Some of the more creative dimensions accentuate that feature of play - the notion of playing with ideas and forms.”

## THEME FOUR

# THE PLACE IN BETWEEN



## Melanie's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- How can we use stories to find the spaces between multiple ways of knowing?
- How do we think about the capacity for systems thinkers to not interpret things literally?
- How do we make connections across boundaries & binaries?
- How can empathy be encouraged rather than discouraged through multiple perspectives?
- Can we create multi-perspective stories that are compelling, clear and full of meaning?

*Relational systems thinking is a theoretical framework to think about healing self and systems. I published Relational Systems Thinking after a series of conversations I had with Mohawk Elders of the Six Nations, who shared with me the teachings of the two-row Wampum belt, as well as Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer at MIT.*

*Relational systems thinking is about reasoning between multiple ways of knowing. It's not about choosing sides - systems theory and complexity science on the one side; indigenous knowledge systems on the other. It's about the space in-between, and dancing with these two ideas until a third presence shows up.*

### Things to try:



- Suspend hidden judgments. Identify what is sub-consciously being labeled as “good” or “bad” and see what happens if that judgment is set aside for a period of time.
- Invite in a storyteller who is on the other “side” of a political or social divide. In a safe way, ask them to share their story.
- Take stories that feel oppositional and put them together. What new understanding might come from putting these opposed thoughts in relationship with each other?
- Create spaces for playfulness when crafting stories. Use music, dance, art and poetry to start your storytelling sessions and see how the tone changes.

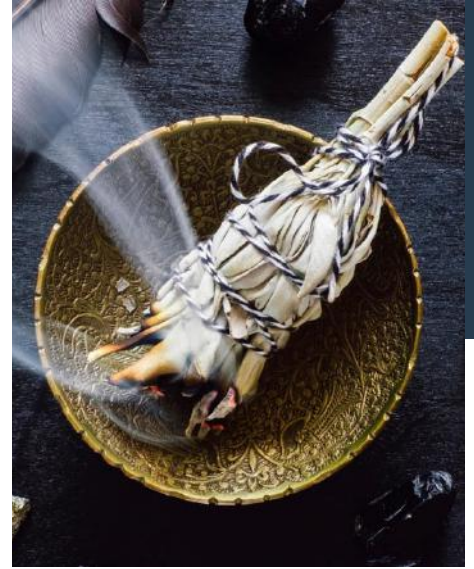
*Common to indigenous knowledge systems around the world is that we use metaphor and stories. We're all sharing the river of life together. Systems are made up of many things. How do we bring them together so people can see them?*

*For example, burning sage is a sacred ritual. Sometimes we need courage to bring this forward, as if to say, “This is my way of being with you. Do you have the courage to walk with me in this way and to trust that it makes as much sense as your way of being?”*

## THEME FIVE

# RITUAL & THE SACRED

“How do you signal that it’s storytelling time? What rituals are used? How do we distinguish between stories that are sacred and stories you can share over a beer?”



### Why is ritual and the sacred important?

In the CoP, we discussed that there are two types of stories: “everyday” stories and sacred stories. Everyday stories are the stories we share at the proverbial watercooler, or over a meal, or at a gathering with friends. They are important because they help us understand our day-to-day reality and what that looks like for different people. There are also sacred stories - stories that carry historical and cultural significance, explain our origins and purpose, convey our values and interconnectedness. These stories require sacred space, or a space set apart from everyday reality, often marked by rituals that signify to the listener the importance of what is about to occur.

**Use the power of silence:** Silence is one way of setting space and time apart for sacred stories. One of CCL’s Systems Storytellers explained, “Silence is one of the most under-utilized techniques in meaning-making and storytelling. If you give enough room for silence in the story, a range of possibilities emerge. One, you can make a more direct link to the emotional core of the story. Scientifically it’s been shown that if you sit in silence after hearing something or hearing a question, part of what it does is help people bypass their short term memory to go to long term memory and pull from their own life experiences. It helps people notice the emotion and then make sense of that emotion. It helps them hear what they said and then make sense of it.”

**Being present, going slow:** Another important aspect of sacredness is being present and taking our time, as several CCL Systems Storytellers emphasized. Said one, “This is all about presence. In order to see these things, hear these things, connect to the nuance, you’ve got to be present and not distracted. When you are present, there’s an honoring of human beings as spiritual beings.” Another described the contrast between fast and slow: “We live in a fast food world of getting things done, generating ideas quickly, keeping things moving. We forget that sometimes we need stillness. Sometimes you need to just stand still and wait, because you have no idea what is going on. You need to see what’s going on before you know what to do next.”

**Tension between mystery and knowledge:** Finally, sacred space gives us permission to not know for a period of time. One of CCL’s System Storytellers helped us understand this by saying, “Fields like science, mathematics, medicine are always in search of an answer, a diagnosis. Often, our storytelling approaches for systems have that same diagnostic stance: can we make what is happening here legible so we can understand it and diagnose it? But there’s a difference to approaching a system with a desire to seek an answer or a diagnosis rather than just a desire to experience it and hope that experience will lead us in the direction of a range of possibilities. Approaching systems with the stance of not knowing, and staying grounded in not knowing, is a valid stance.”



## THEME FIVE

# RITUAL & THE SACRED



## Sibusiso's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- What rituals can be used to prepare people and communities to tell and hear stories?
- How can rituals allow us to bring together elements of a system in new ways so people can see them?
- How do we create rituals that set aside sacred space for storytelling?
- How do we encourage and harness the power of silence?
- In many cultures, the space where two rivers meet is often a sacred and powerful place. How can we use this metaphor to create a confluence of stories that meet in a sacred place?

### Things to try:



- Create a ritual to open important conversations and meetings. This can be a check-in question, a pot of tea, a poem read aloud, or a collective moment of silence.
- Set aside regular time for storytelling (once a month or more) that serves no “product” purpose, but serves instead to connect and understand each other better. Use story prompts or create your own.
- Get comfortable with silence. Wait a minute or two when asking a question or when moving to another topic. Ensure that storytellers may choose not to tell their stories if they prefer.
- Create times where answers and solutions do not need to be generated. Engage in conversations where the only purpose is to experience a story as it is today.

*Playing for Change didn't start as a movement. It started as a tool for filmmakers who were looking for inspiration back in 2002, and my co-founders ended up creating this powerful documentary about a man named Roger, who was singing Stand By Me with so much heart and passion. Different renditions of Stand by Me sung in South Africa, Spain, the US, and around the world were fused into one song. That documentary built relationships and then sparked a movement.*

*Playing for Change is a movement that provides music education in the townships. Our public systems don't invest in music education. No kid in a township takes piano or saxophone classes - only kids from privileged backgrounds in private schools have access to music. So we launched a crowdfunding campaign and built a music studio in a shipping container in the crime capital of South Africa. It humbles us to know we can offer role models to children they can look up to. Then we started hearing from people around the world asking, “What can we do together?” Over the years, countries like Mali, Ghana, Mexico, Thailand, Bangladesh replicated the Imvula Music Program. Today we have 17 music programs across 13 countries.*

*We use music to change the narrative. The African songs we create tell of struggle and our terrible past of apartheid. We use music to send a message - we might be from townships, from places where crime and drug abuse and unemployment are high, but there's so much talent. The students give world-class performances. Someone has to heal people creatively, through dance and musical expression. Our program exists to meet that gap and tell our stories. More than anything for us to thrive as humanity, we need peace. And we use the means of music to encourage peace.*

## THEME SIX

# LANGUAGE

“In the language we use to describe change processes, we give power to people sitting outside of the change process, usually because they bring money and have a particular kind of power. Recipients vs funders. To shift the narrative, do we need to begin to name players in the change process differently?”



### Why is language important?

Language was a recurring theme during our CoP sessions. We discussed how language shapes our reality and understanding of systems, providing both opportunities and challenges when we work in multilingual environments. Although we used English as our common language, in several cases, CCL Systems Storytellers used their primary language to describe aspects of storytelling that could not be conveyed as well in English. There were also many playful moments of sharing stories about words and concepts that existed in one culture or geography, but were used differently or not at all in others.

**Language both transmits and shapes meaning:** We usually think of language as describing reality, but language is also a shaper of reality. One of CCL's Systems Storytellers explained one of these cases in her own geography: "I'm a child of the equator. In Bantu languages, the way that we name hours is based on dawn because it never changes. It is constant. And yet for other languages, that doesn't make sense. We can't hold things that are aliens to us. Context, lived experience, language, and reality are the storytelling cues we need to embrace and look for."

**Some ideas can only be accessed through specific languages:** In several cases, we were exposed to new ideas that simply could not be conveyed in languages other than the language in which that idea arose. For example, one of CCL's Systems Storytellers used a unique linguistic concept called a "word bundle". She described: "In our language, Anishinaabemowin, we don't have a word for nature, we use a holophrase (a word bundle) Gidakiiminan that means 'everything in Creation, sun, moon, stars, mountains, deserts, forest, waters, animals, and human beings, and our sacred place in Creation.' That's where knowledge resides. We borrow it from the land and that's where it lives."

**Privileging written language limits understanding:** We discussed how written language is only one way to engage with stories, and we explored how other types of storytelling can give us different perspectives and understanding. One of CCL's System Storytellers described her profession as an oral storyteller: "When I work with story, a lot of it is about orality and being present. When I tell a story in an oral tradition, how I tell the story always changes depending on how I am feeling that day, who is in the room, how I am reading the audience, and what feedback the audience is giving me. There's a constant conversation happening, which is emergent. The story unfolds in a different way because of what is happening in the room."



## THEME SIX

# LANGUAGE



## mwihaki's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- How do we use language to embrace context & lived experience, but also transcend them?
- How can we use language to move beyond the anthropocentric in our storytelling?
- How can we include multiple languages in stories so that dominant languages are not exclusively privileged?
- How can we give status to other storytelling traditions - such as oral storytelling, dance, music and other forms of expression?

*If we just look at the core of what we all want, we will uncover that it is dignity, wellbeing, respect and security.*

*This is the space where I think stories can be so powerful, in terms of helping us make sense of the world that we operate in. But the challenge is that stories can also be self-serving, and narrow - because our stories sometimes confirm the biases that we have about others, and they can sometimes put us in a position where hierarchies can start to emerge, and it becomes a possibility that someone feels their story is more important or meaningful than the next persons.*

### Things to try:



- Invite storytellers to tell stories in language(s) and traditions of their own choosing.
- If translating, consider translating back to the original language to see if there are nuances revealed in the ideas conveyed. Use examples, quotes and anecdotes from geographies where the language is spoken.
- Remain open to language “mixing”, where multilingual storytellers choose terms from the language that conveys an idea most closely to the intention of the storyteller.
- Consider terminology. If there are words that are used innocuously, but which are metaphorically dangerous, consider using new terms.
- Be playful with language. Notice when words reveal surprising histories and baggage. These are not just burdens to unload, but learning opportunities to share.

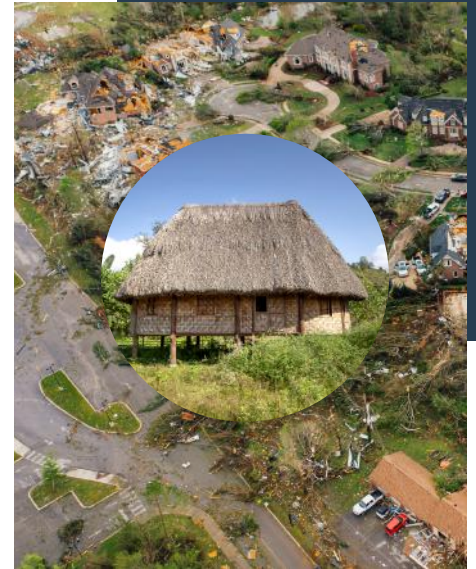
*So, I think stories are wonderful and important, but have to be handled carefully, because of this idea that stories are the lens through which we see the world and through which we make sense of everything that is around us.*



## THEME SEVEN

# DIMENSIONALITY

“Systems need these dynamic representations because they behave in ways that are different from history and from stories that we tell. What does that look like? There's a need to toggle between the two scales, between the system and the human scale. We need them as context for each other.”



### Why is dimensionality important?

We discussed how dimensionality can have resonance for systems storytelling. Dimensionality refers to the perception of an object in space, looking beyond a flat structure to see an object's height, width and depth. It also refers to an object having many different features and qualities, particularly when perceived from different viewpoints or scales. Seeing the dimensionality of systems - with all of their facets and features - is a significant challenge for systems change. We discussed at length how storytelling can augment our understanding of systems, by helping us see things at different scales and with different perceptions.

**Looking at systems from different scales:** One of the primary ways that stories can help us to understand systems is through looking at systems at different levels or scales. One of CCL's Systems Storytellers described this: "Another way to think about the human scale and the systems scale, or the zoom lens and the wide-angle lens, is to think about the distinction between episodic storytelling and thematic. Episodic storytelling is the zoom lens, the portrait of the individual. Thematic is the wide-angle lens, what's happening in the broader landscape. There's an assumption that our stories are one or the other. What about a story that is both episodic and thematic? Or what about a story that's a series of exposures, of portraits, that illustrates the broader landscape?"

**Stories used as data:** We rely on data to help us perceive systems, but too often we think about data as being solely numerical based. However, stories are also a strong source of data, particularly when it comes to complex systems. In our discussion, we considered how large data sets can be combined with storytelling to make sense of systems. As one CCL Systems Storyteller reflected on this: "If systems are inherently things that change over time and in space, then the way that we come to understand them would also need to use these two parameters actively. We're learning about what's happening. With any system one of the easiest ways is to talk to individuals and hear their stories."

**Static versus emergent stories:** We discussed how to understand and make sense of systems, given that they are emergent and always changing. Stories can seem "static" since we are used to engaging written stories. However, there are different ways of storytelling that might be more useful for emergent systems. One CCL Systems Storyteller helped us to understand this: "I like the power of oral storytelling because it's emergent. When we are exploring a system and listening to people, we will sometimes pay attention to the things that seem insignificant because they might be the most significant thing in the system."

# THEME SEVEN

## DIMENSIONALITY

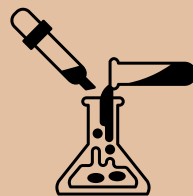


## Joanne's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- How can we play with scale and dimension in order to 'see' systems more clearly?
- How can we use different storytelling traditions to engage with the emergence of systems?
- How do we embrace stillness and slowness, to allow for the patience that this work requires?
- How do we balance the tensions between legibility & illegibility? Knowing & mystery?



### Things to try:

- Play with the scale of a story. Tell a "human-scale" story alongside a "systems-scale" story to see if this helps with understanding.
- Treat your stories as data. Gather large numbers of stories and look for themes and patterns, as well as aberrations.
- Use different storytelling traditions to create dynamic stories. For example, don't write the story down, but rather tell the story aloud. Use the feedback from the audience to understand the story from different angles.

*Systems and stories appear irreconcilable. Stories are static and linear. Systems are emergent. Stories are about experiences, usually told from individual perspectives. Systems are about behaviors. Systems need dynamic representations because they behave in ways that are different from history and from stories that we tell. How do we reconcile them?*

*My formal training is in photography and architecture. Architecture is a way to calibrate across scale, from the small to the large, and from the concrete to the theoretical. If you look at only a picture of one building and not the map view of the city, you don't have any context of what you're looking at. It's the same thing across stories and systems.*

*They are such different ways of seeing, but we need them as context for each other. We need to toggle between the two scales, between the system and the human scale. What could that look like for system storytelling?*

## THEME EIGHT

# AGENCY

“Our broader aim is to switch the signal. There is so much adaptive resilience and hope and genuine decency and kindness. That is truly the signal that we live in. It's who we really are, at essence, yet it is largely missing from the conversation, especially when we talk about reforming systems and inviting people in to bring their love, their care, and their talent to change the world.”



### Why is agency important?

In the CoP, we often discussed the power of stories. However, not all stories are created equal. Certain stories can have a debilitating effect on personal and collective agency, creating paralysis and fear rather than agentic action. If we want to encourage groups and organizations to lean into hope and positivity, we need to tell the types of stories that inspire agency and action.

**Hacking our brains:** Much of storytelling today - traditional journalism, advertising, and social media - is transmitting our natural response to stories into fear and division. While this might make companies more money, it is destroying collective agency toward positive change. A CCL Systems Storyteller explained: “We have an ancient evolutionary bias to focus on gossip, on negativity, on the bad things that people do. It's wired into our brain development. Flipping that bias, uncovering the care and creativity and resilience in any community, requires intention.”

**Framing matters:** “Good news” stories are not necessarily the answer. Instead, we need to tell stories about “positive deviants”, the surprising yet hopeful actions who inspire people and groups to try something different. One CCL Systems Storyteller gave this distinction: “Framing solutions-oriented stories as “good news stories” is not compelling. People say they want that, but it doesn't compete with traditional news. When you frame it as knowledge journalism - helping people understand ideas, patterns, and insights - that's not only competitive; it actually outperforms traditional news.”

**Storytelling creates relational containers:** Storytelling can be a vehicle for keeping groups together while they build relationships and experiment with new ideas and ways of being together. A CCL Systems Storyteller explained: “The way you tell a story creates the capacity for conversation or inhibits it. Traditional journalism, by virtue of its reductive, binary, conflict oriented narrative structure, often inhibits it. Stories that are invitational, on the other hand, can create the relational container for collectives. Many times, I have seen the outcome of a story be a space, a container for relationships. We desperately need stories that help us see into each other's hearts.”



## THEME EIGHT

# AGENCY



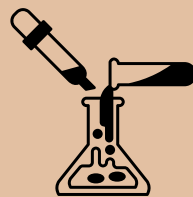
## David's Story



### Questions we are asking:

- Can storytelling have a theory of change?
- Can we move away from solely focusing on what's wrong, to envisioning alternative futures?
- How can 'hack our brains' to think about the future without the bias toward negativity?
- How can we tell stories that exist in the present and influence the future, but fully incorporate the past as well?

### Things to try:



- Use "asset framing" to uncover surprising yet positive stories. Ask within your community: what are two or three things you've seen in the last year that give you an indication of what our community can become?
- Develop and share your own database of agency-filled stories. When you hear about somebody doing something unexpected yet positive, jot it down and keep a growing list. Share the list far and wide.
- Create containers for storytelling. Introduce storytelling into everyday practices. Open a meeting with a prompt: What did you see or hear this week that made you hopeful?

News is usually about non-normal stuff. A news story is never, "The airplane landed." It's something unusual or destabilizing. When journalists understand that what they're mostly reporting on are negative deviants - the worst police departments, the most corrupt companies - they understand it's possible to look at the positive deviants as well, and cover people on the other end of the curve who are doing surprising things.

There is more room in journalism for stories that move the signal from fear, paralysis, and despair to credible, rigorous hope. At [Solutions Journalism Network](#), we started with three people and are now a team of 50. We've worked with more than 600 news organizations around the world and trained close to 30,000 journalists. We have a database of 13,000 stories that we've gathered from partners and close to 2,000 news organizations have adapted a "Solutions Journalism approach," which we basically define as reporting that covers how people are responding to a problem and what we can learn from that.

People are getting the message that we need to adjust the way we communicate with each other in this many-to-many, eight billion to eight billion world. Our broader aim is to switch the signal. There is so much adaptive resilience and hope and genuine decency and kindness. That is truly the signal that we live in. It's who we really are, at essence, yet it is largely missing from the conversation, especially when we talk about reforming systems and inviting people in to bring their love, their care, and their talent to change the world.

## THEME NINE

# INTERGENERATIONALITY

“They walked in as if their souls had for a moment taken flight. We, bound by the clock, stuck to the agenda. We forgot the power we had to change the process. That making space for grief was as important as theorizing and researching. They walked in the pain of generations etched on their faces breath caught.”



### Why is intergenerationality important?

In the CoP, we considered the importance of including intergenerationality into practices of systems storytelling. Intergenerationality goes beyond history, it involves understanding the relationship between generations and using that understanding to shape the present and future. Storytelling can help us make these connections - between past, present and future - and to iterate between these timeframes to gain better clarity within complex systems.

**Bring in the past:** When crafting stories, go back further than the founding date of an organisation or the conception of a single solution. Trace the lineage of a systemic issue and relate the individual and community stories of those who have lived through it. A CCL Systems Storyteller emphasized this: “Storytelling doesn't exist in the present; it brings in the past and the future. There's so much of an orientation right now in systems that does not bring in the past. People are starting to talk about history, past context, trauma that has been created. As we relate storytelling to systems, we need to be explicit about the continuity of past, present, and future.”

**Avoiding truncated and linear stories:** Too often, stories in the nonprofit sector are guided by funding timelines and organizational mandates. Crafting stories that include longer time horizons can help create better systems stories. One CCL Systems Storyteller explained: “My conception of time is rooted in my native tongue, and the words we use reflect a different understanding of the continuity of time, how it flows, and how change happens. But the way we currently tell stories - not only are they linear, they are truncated. Your grant report to your funder tells the story of how you changed the world in one year. What does an intergenerational understanding of systems change look like?”

**Treating stories as living things:** Stories, by definition, have a beginning, middle and end. However, this “bounding” is a storyteller's choice and can shift based on who is telling the story and why. A CCL Systems Storyteller considered an alternative: “Perhaps stories don't ‘belong’ to us—in the same way that a flower, growing in the earth, does not yet belong to a person who comes along and cuts it. Stories are living things, not cut flowers. Often stories feel cut because of who tells them and who keeps them, and that is an act of violence. Stories live longer than us. But what does it mean for stories to live? Who tends to living stories? What role do we play in sustaining them?”

## THEME NINE

# INTERGENERATIONALITY



## Philippa's Story



### Questions we are asking:

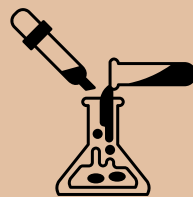
- What does an intergenerational understanding of systems change look like?
- How do we revisit history in our systems stories so that new understandings and interpretations can emerge?
- How do we encourage people to bring their “backstories” into their work as change agents?
- How do we create relationships between the past, present and future?

*I put story at the center of the way that I work. I use it as a sense-making tool. I see the ability of story to hold things together that don't really make sense. Working with people, storytelling becomes a powerful tool because you are able to bring different perspectives together as a way of making sense of the work. In my work, I help the system see itself. I also help the actors in the system reflect on the story they tell themselves about the system and the story they tell themselves about themselves.*

*To do that, you have to build self-reflection into the process. You have to get people to slow down, listen more deeply, and ask more questions. You have to help them understand how things that have happened in the past are still living within the system, even as we move forward. Going through self-reflection and getting to a deeper understanding is an iterative process. Only then you can ask, 'How do we then intervene?'*

*When I work with story, a lot of it is about orality and being present. When I tell a story in an oral tradition, how I tell the story always changes depending on how I am feeling that day, who is in the room, how I am reading the audience, and what feedback the audience is giving me. There's a constant conversation happening, which is emergent.*

*The story unfolds in a different way because of what is happening in the room. For me, this captures the dimensionality of systems change. When I facilitate groups, when I explore a system, when I listen to people: I must pay attention to things that seem insignificant, because those might be the most significant things in terms of how to change the system.*



### Things to try:

- Engage in personal storytelling as a way to discover new aspects and facets of your colleagues and partners in the work.
- Invite in storytellers from different generations and ask them about their experiences and the changes that they have lived through.
- Start your stories from 2-3 generations back. Do this authentically by speaking to those who lived through that history.
- Tell the same story, but use a few different timeframes. See what changes.



# WHAT IS STORYTELLING FOR?



In our final sessions with the CoP, we discussed the purposes of storytelling and the next steps that we can take to build the practice of systems storytelling. The purposes and possibilities of storytelling felt clearer than at the beginning of our journey, and we were able to articulate four distinct purposes:

- **Understanding:** To represent, empathize with and understand the multiple perspectives in a system.
- **Cohering:** To connect with a community of social change actors to make meaning together of what a system is and what it can become.
- **Imagining:** To activate creativity and deep yearnings that reveal future possibilities for a system; to find “in-between” places that exist alongside polarizing beliefs or worldviews.
- **Re-narrating:** To immerse ourselves in new narratives that drive a particular system transformation.



## Nat's Story

*When I think about framing, I'm interested in the choices that we make and how we present information - the decisions that we are aware of and those that we are unaware of when we communicate ideas. Big things like our values, and small things like pronouns. Do we say “them” - as in, those people over there? Or do we say “we” and talk about our? All of these choices affect how people understand information, what emotions they feel when interacting with ideas, and most importantly, how they act.*

*How do we increase engagement with ideas we want to advance? Social psychologists have found that when stories are framed as high in terms of urgency - e.g. a description of the problem, how bad the problem is, lots of data about the problem - but low in terms of efficacy - e.g. the degree to which solutions are possible - then people overwhelmingly disengage. Their reaction is, ‘You just told me about another big problem that we can’t do anything about, so I’m moving on.’*

*On the other hand, balancing a robust sense of urgency with an equally robust sense of efficacy is a powerful narrative persuasive strategy. Creating stories that balance urgency with efficacy pulls people in, provides tension, but gives them a place to go. They can see there’s a path forward that warrants their attention, their participation, their engagement. Adding in a robust example of a solution makes the story even more powerful.*

*Stories are about giving people an alternative way to see the world - how it works and how it could work. The only way to shift mindsets is to offer a steady diet of narratives that offer a different way of thinking about the world. It’s not about advocating for a particular policy or solution; it’s about changing the context in which people consider policies and solutions. As we continue thinking about and exploring what “works,” this notion of shifting mindsets is provocative and ambitious.*



## Conclusion (for now): Where do we go from here?

In the coming months, we will be testing these themes and practices in the context of collectives pursuing systems change. We will be acting as “Storytelling Coaches”, experimenting alongside collectives who are working to tell stories of systems change:

- Inside organizations and collectives, to make meaning of the change that they are creating and experiencing.
- Between organizations, collectives and their stakeholders (ie, funders and supporters), to demonstrate how change is happening.
- Outside, to engage mainstream audiences around how to make progress on complex challenges

Beyond the testing phase, we plan to establish a Systems Storytelling Coaches Circle which will bring together global storytellers who seek to become Story Coaches in collectives. We plan to host an inaugural Systems Storytelling Coaches Circle in mid 2023 to bring together storytellers interested in facilitating systems storytelling practices in their own communities and work.

Ultimately, we hope to support what we see as a significant and important shift in our sector toward collective action. To undertake this level of collective agency, our storytelling practices need to move beyond the linear, heroic stories that dominate the landscape today. We have seen that many storytelling methods and techniques are alive and thriving in creative sectors and communities, but have not yet been directed toward the formal and traditional social sector.

We hope this initiative can spark a new sectoral conversation about systems storytelling, toward a future where systems storytelling is a living practice within collectives, allowing groups to feel a sense of cohesion and organize around shared values. We also imagine a future where funders do not single out individual grantees or heroic founders, but rather weave together multiple perspectives into a cohesive story of systems change.

**Most importantly, we look forward to a future where the “story of storytelling” is returned to its rightful place: the practice which allows us to make sense of the world that we live in, respect our diverse heritages, and celebrate our shared humanity.**

# Acknowledgments

## Community Of Practice Members:

David Bornstein, USA  
Joanne Cheung, USA / Hong Kong  
Melanie Goodchild, Canada  
Philippa Kabali-Kagwa, Uganda / South Africa  
John Kania, USA  
Nat Kendall-Taylor, USA  
mwihaki muraguri, Kenya  
Sibusiso Nyamakazi, South Africa  
Cynthia Rayner, USA  
Tara Roberts, USA  
Nayantara Sen, USA  
Nicolas van Hemelryck, Colombia

Learn more about CCL Storytellers [here](#)

## Collective Change Lab Contributors:

Tad Khosa, Communications Manager, South Africa  
Katherine Milligan, Director, Switzerland  
Juanita Zerda, Director, USA / Colombia

## Systems Storytelling Initiative Supporters:

Lankelly Chase  
Skoll Foundation  
Carnegie Corporation of New York



The Collective Change Lab is a lab for collaboration. Our goal is to bring transformational systems change practices from the periphery to mainstream social and environmental problem-solving. Together with our partners, we co-create and experiment with system change approaches that engage not only our minds but also our hearts, bodies, and spirit.

We support people, organizations, communities and collectives in catalyzing social change beyond the incremental.

to learn more  
[visit collectivechangelab.org](https://collectivechangelab.org)