Systems Storytelling

Facilitating systems transformation through stories

Project Objectives

- **Phase 1: Identify non-dominant storytelling methods**
  With the support of a diverse Community of Practice, identify storytelling methods and traditions that enable collective and participatory meaning-making and depart from linear and heroic narratives.

- **Phase 2: Test & disseminate non-dominant storytelling methods**
  Test these methods in the context of collectives pursuing systems change. Document and disseminate the learnings as they are developed.

- **Phase 3: Develop a 'systems storytelling school'**
  Create an online or in-person course where these methods/traditions become part of a collective leadership toolkit.

A bit of terminology - Stories, Narratives, Culture

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- **<u>Stories</u>** are like **<u>stars</u>**. Individual, shiny and bright, they move and inspire us.

- **<u>Narratives</u>** are a collection of stories like **<u>constellations</u>** are a collection of stars. Stories can be connected together into narratives, making a deeper kind of sense and meaning.

- A **<u>culture</u>**, then, is like a **<u>galaxy</u>**. Ever expanding and evolving, a culture is comprised, in part, of narratives as the galaxy is comprised, in part, of constellations.

Storytelling is Our Oldest Social Change Tool

- Storytelling is humanity's oldest "technology" to create social change. 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.

- When we tell stories together, and over time, we can activate *collective agency*, the ability for groups to cohere and create a shared future.

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.

- These stories exist to influence ("sell") rather than cohere: they position individuals/organizations as powerful agents who address social challenges through single solutions.

- Often, these stories reinforce existing power narratives about who and how social change should happen, ultimately limiting the set of options available for systems change.

HOW STORYTELLING AFFECTS THE BRAIN
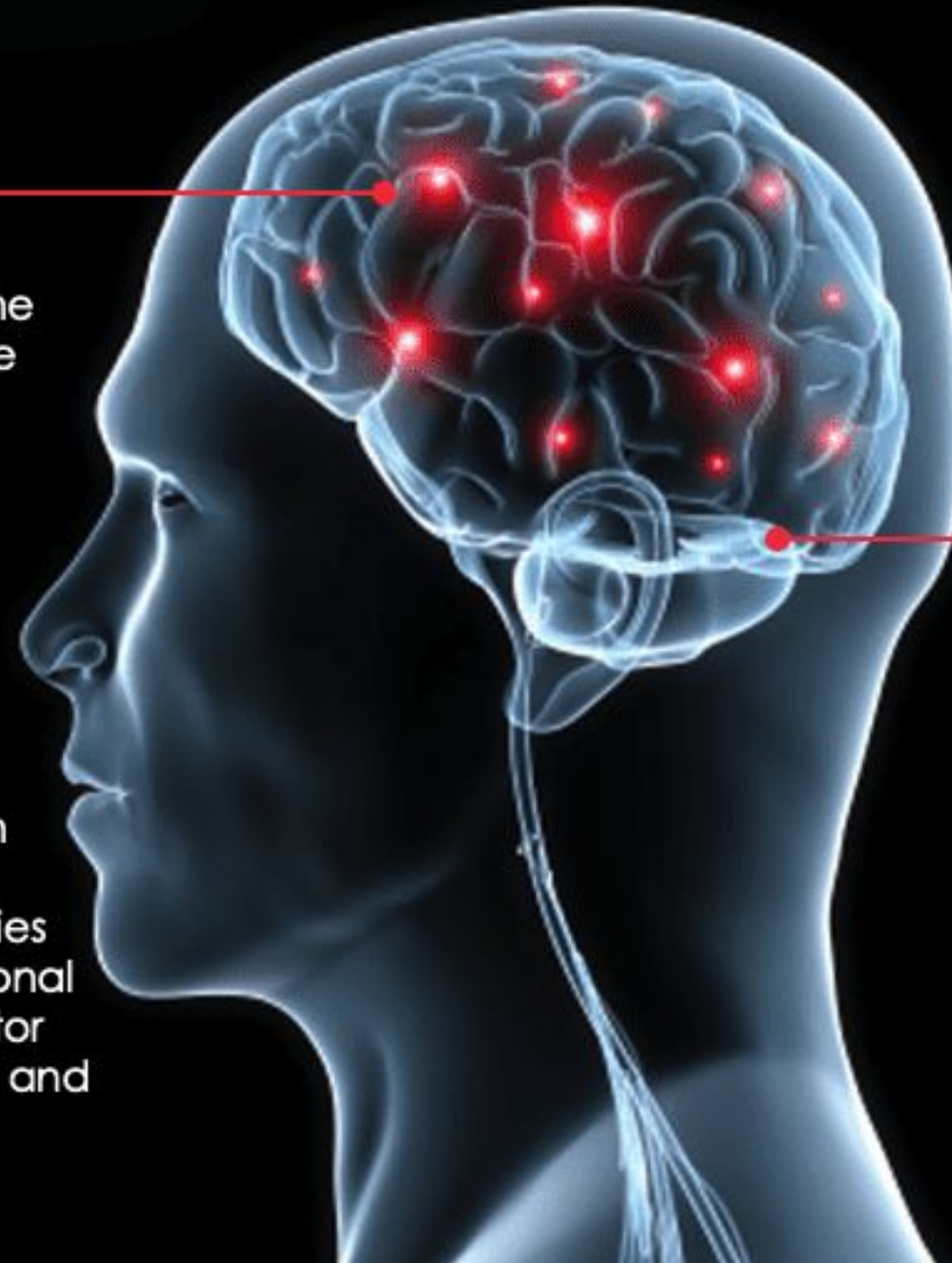
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NEURAL COUPLING
A story synchronizes the listener's brain with the teller's brain.

MIRRORING
Mirror neurons enable listeners to mirror experience

CORTICAL ACTIVITY
Two areas of the brain are activated when processing facts. Stories activate many additional areas such as the motor cortex, sensory cortex and frontal cortex.

DOPAMINE
The brain releases dopamine in response to an emotionally-charged event, resolution of conflict, or even recognition of a pattern, creating a pleasurable response and ease of memory and recall

CORTISOL
The brain releases cortisol when it experiences conflict which increases attention and memory

OXYTOCIN
The brain releases oxytocin in response to characters that increases empathy and connection as well as compassion and trust

Why Storytelling and Systems?

- 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.

Our fellow travelers - The Community of Practice

David Bornstein
Journalist & Author

Joanne Cheung
Artist & Writer

Melanie Goodchild
Researcher & Systems Thinker

Nat Kendall-Taylor
Narrative researcher & Mobilizer

Philippa Kabali-Kagwa
Storyteller, Poet & Coach

mwĩhaki mũragũri
AfroOptimist & Idea Explorer

S'bu Nyamakazi
Musician & Speaker

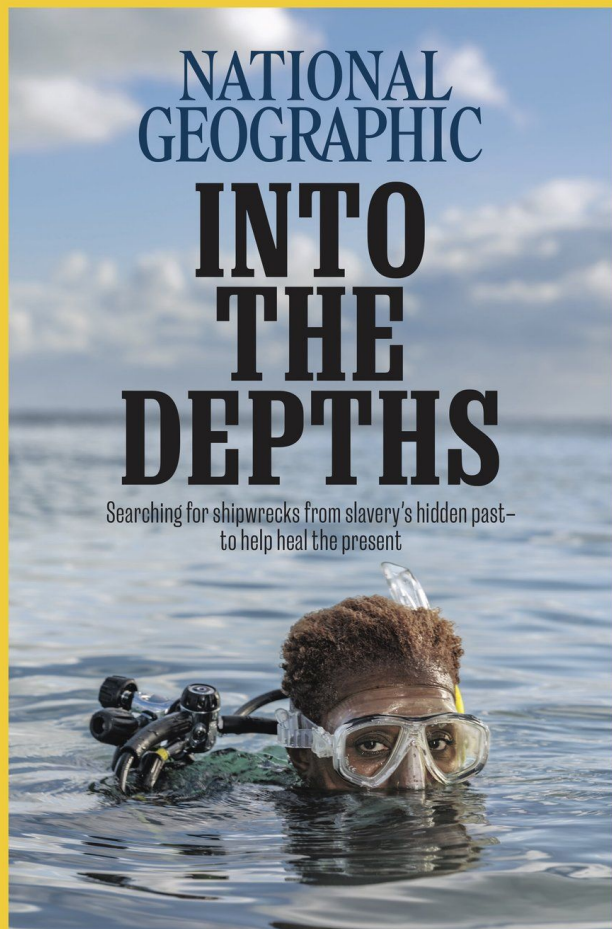**Tara Roberts**
Explorer & Storyteller

Nayantara Sen
Narrative Strategist & Writer

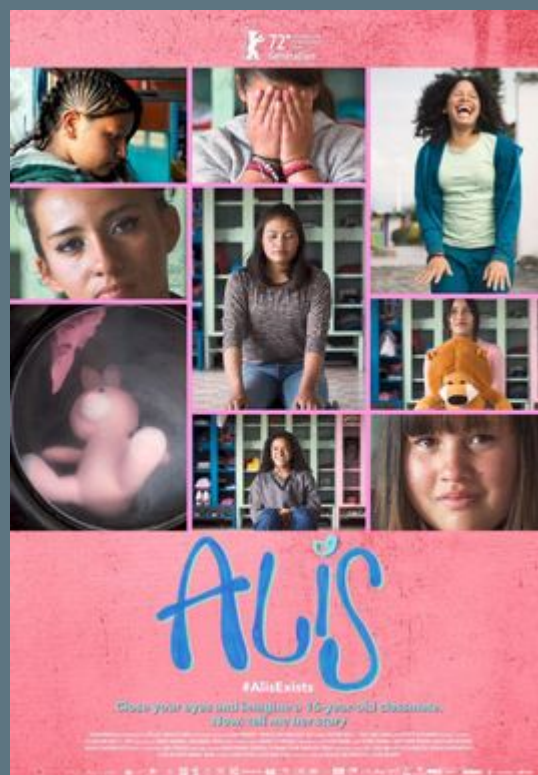**Nicolas van Hemelryck**
Filmmaker & Architect

Storytelling genres explored...

Podcasting / Multi-media
Into the Depths, Tara Roberts

DocumentaryFilmmaking *Alis Nicolas Van Hemelryck & Clare Weiskopf*

Authentically African Storytelling
Paukwa House, mwihaki muraguri

Indigenous Systems Thinking
Relational Systems Thinking, Melanie Goodchild

Credit: Kelvy Bird
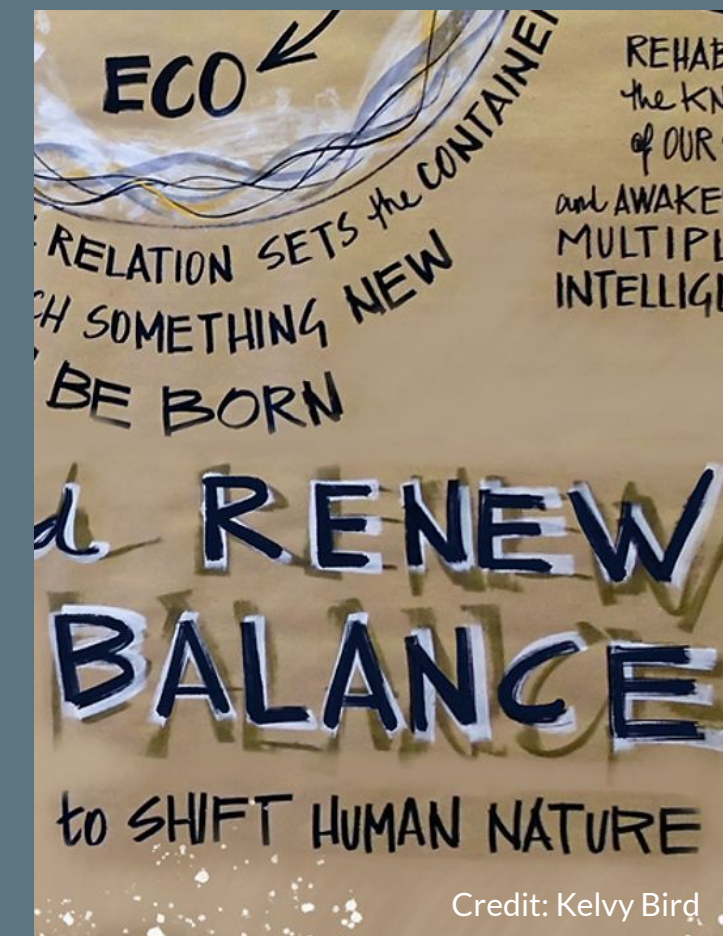
Asset-Based Framing Journalism
Solutions Journalism Network, David Bornstein

Rethinking Storytelling

From Transaction

- How does Storytelling as a *product* convince others to think or do in specific ways?

To Transformation

- How does Storytelling as a *practice* bring us together by reshaping how we see a system?
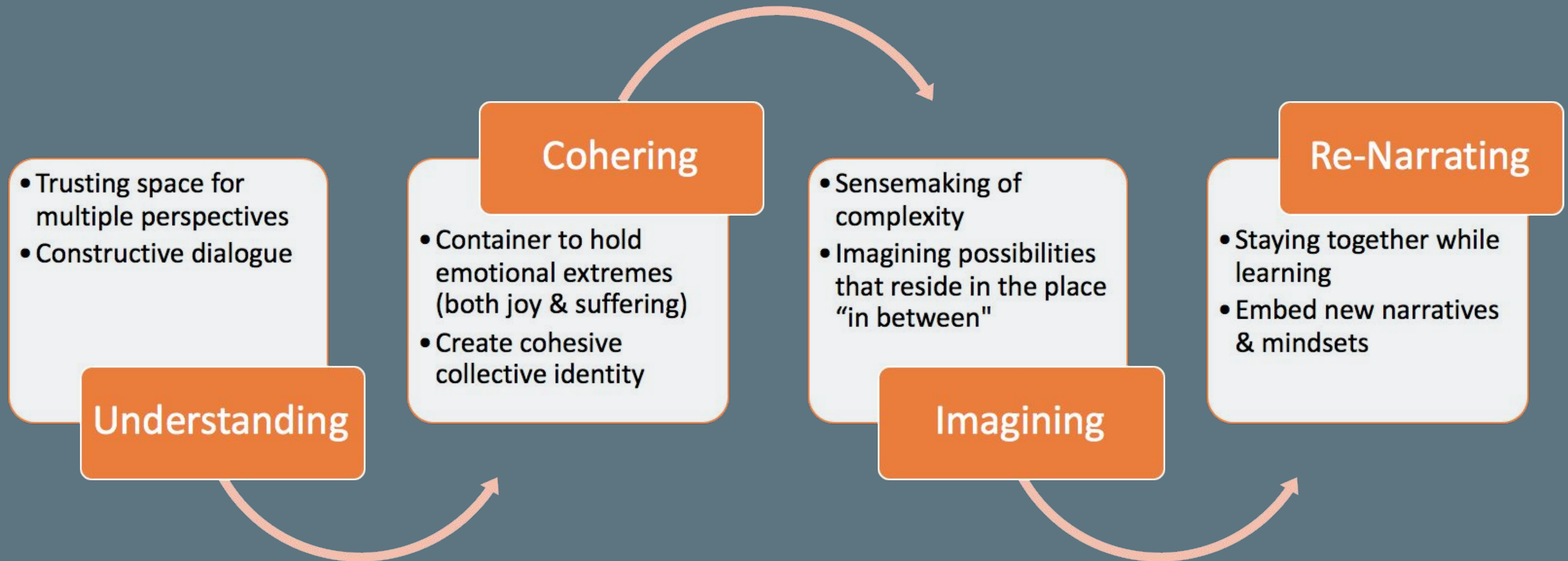
Systems Storytelling: A Process for Meaning-Making

Systems Storytelling is a process for **pluralistic groups** to **come together** and **make meaning** of systems they are seeking to positively influence toward equity & justice.

It incorporates diverse traditions and genres of storytelling to increase the **understanding**, **coherence**, **imagination** and **narrative power** of collectives.
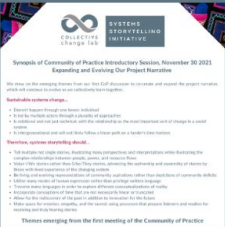
Storytelling "For What?"

Understanding
- Trusting space for multiple perspectives
- Constructive dialogue

Cohering
- Container to hold emotional extremes (both joy & suffering)
- Create cohesive collective identity

Imagining
- Sensemaking of complexity
- Imagining possibilities that reside in the place "in between"

Re-Narrating
- Staying together while learning
- Embed new narratives & mindsets

We have distilled the lessons from our CoP sessions to share with external audiences:

Storytelling Session Highlights

Session 1 Session 2 Session 3 Session 4 Session 5

Quotes & Insights

SYSTEMS STORYTELLING: THE POWER OF MUSIC

We use music to **change the narrative.** We use music to say, we might live in townships, in places where crime and drug abuse and unemployment are rampant, but you know what else we have? Talent. We have so much talent. Our students can give world-class performances. **Our program exists to meet that gap and tell our stories.**

Sibusiso Nyamakazi
Co-Founder of the Philippi Music Project

SYSTEMS STORYTELLING: MULTIPLE WAYS OF KNOWING

In ancient times, our hearts t to do. In modern times, it's telling our hearts what to do. reminder that **the heart and** dichotomy. We must always n and the mind. **They are in bala**

Anishinaabe
Founder of the

Understanding your power as the storyteller is really important. It has to be approached with humility. It's a sacred part of the process. **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.

Philippa Kabali-Kagwa
Storyteller and Poet

COLLECTIVE change lab

STORYTELLING AS MEANING-MAKING

SYSTEMS STORYTELLING INITIATIVE

Our Learning Journey

Nearly a year ago, we set off on a journey to discover how Storytelling can help us transform social systems. Our journey is ongoing, but we would like to share our emerging learnings from the systems storytelling initiative in this compendium.

DOWNLOAD STORYTELLING COMPENDIUM

We will test these methods in the context of collectives pursuing systems change. We anticipate Storytelling Coaching will allow for new storytelling methods to be used:

1. <u>Inside organizations and collectives</u>, to make meaning of the change that they are creating and experiencing

2. <u>Between organizations, collectives and their stakeholders</u> (ie, funders and supporters), to show how change is happening

3. <u>Outside, to mainstream audiences</u>, to show how change is unfolding

What do we hope Storytelling Coaching can achieve?

1. Better understanding of the complex nature of a social system

2. More trusting relationships among collective team members and the communities you serve

3. Deeper understanding and more constructive dialogue between the stakeholders in a system

4. A container that better holds the emotional extremes (both suffering and joy) that are inevitable in social change work

5. A more cohesive collective identity among collective team members and your constituents

1. **Assemble a Storytelling Circle**: We will identify a 'Storytelling Circle' which includes individuals from the collective seeking to drive change. The Circle should include those who tell I/We stories.

2. **Identify Storytelling Needs:** The CCL Story Coach will work with the Circle to identify the Storytelling needs of the collective. This will reveal the multiple perspectives in the system.

3. **Conduct Circle Work:** The Coach will meet with the Circle for 3-6 months, exploring specific themes. We will build Rituals, Routines & Relationships through the process.

4. **Create a Living Storytelling Practice:** The Storytelling Circle will make commitments to creating a living storytelling practice.

Storytelling - Testing Pipeline

Organization	Test Type	Coach(es)	Next Steps
Californians for Justice (CFJ)	Storytelling Circle	Cynthia, Juanita, Tad	Session 3 (Jan)
Indigenous Changemakers System Studio / Wolf Willow	Community of Practice	Melanie	Session 1 (Feb)
Dunna	Storytelling Circle	Juanita, Dunna	Session 2 tbd
All In for Kids	Collectives Workshop	Cynthia, John	Possible ToT model
Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma	Internal Workshop	Cynthia, John	Workshop (Feb)
Skillman Foundation	Internal Workshop	Cynthia, Philippa	Proposal submitted (Jan)
Colorado Health Foundation	TBD	TBD	Follow up (Jan)
Collaboratory/NEON	TBD	TBD	Follow up
Water Collaborative	Storytelling Circle	Philippa	Follow up
Nat Geo Explorers Phase 2	Traveling Storytelling Circles	Tara	Approved; 2023+
Casco Bay Bioregion	Storytelling Circle	TBD	Re-engage?

Coaching Questions for Exploration

1 **Authorship:** Who are the current Storytellers in our system? Who is privileged? Who is absent or silenced? How will we build our Storytelling Circle? How will we be in our circle together?

2 **Multiple Perspectives:** What perspectives are we privileging? How can we step into more and different perspectives? How will we invite these perspectives into our Storytelling Circle?

3 **Intergenerationality:** What are our backstories? Who are the "ancestors" who journey with us? What is our shared history? What pain and joy do we bring to the Storytelling Circle?

4 **Language:** What languages do we speak in our minds? In our hearts? What languages do we need to bring into the Storytelling Circle? How will we notice when languages become a barrier? How will we notice when language offers an opportunity?

18

5 **Ritual & the Sacred**: What rituals will we enact in our Storytelling Circle? Which stories will require a sacred space and how will we create a sacred space for those stories to emerge?

19

6 **Dimensionality & "the place in between":** What are the binaries in our stories that obscure different truths? How can we tell stories that iterate between the human and natural experience and the generalized system experience?

7 **Creativity, Imagination & Craft:** What are the Storytelling elements that we can play with? Are there tools from Storytelling genres that will unlock new understandings? Is there space for creativity and imagination in our collective?

8 **Agency**: Can we use storytelling to promote individual and collective agency, rather than drive division, despair and apathy? How can we use storytelling to envision alternative futures and believe in our abilities to achieve them?

Beyond the testing phase, we plan to establish a "storytelling coaches circle" which will bring together global Storytellers who seek to become Story Coaches in collectives. Next steps will likely include:

1. <u>February 2023</u>: We will convene the Storytelling CoP & key stakeholders at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center to harvest the lessons learned from Phases 1 & 2

2. <u>Spring 2023</u>: We will codify these learnings and develop the *Story Coach's Guide to Systems Storytelling*, which can be used by collectives and coaches alike

3. <u>Mid 2023:</u> We will host an inaugural *Systems Storytelling Coaches Circle* to bring together Storytellers and Collectives interested in facilitating systems storytelling practices

4. <u>Late 2023</u>: In collaboration with the Center for Public Impact, we are in conversations to launch *digital campfires* where Storytellers can share lessons from their experiences

Thank you to our supporters

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