



Storytelling for Organizing

A guide for reflecting on and developing your public narrative

THE HEAD & THE HEART

We understand the world in two ways -- through our head (strategy & analysis) and through our heart (story & motivation). **Leaders must use both the head and the heart**, engaging people in interpreting why we should change the world (our motivations) and how we can change it (our strategies). Storytelling is the "why" -- the art of translating values into actions through stories.

We don't think our values; we feel our values. Often we don't realize what we value in the world until we hear a story or witness an injustice that stirs emotions within us. Emotions inform us of what we value in ourselves, in others, & in the world. **Stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience. Stories have the power to move others to action.**

Individual or group action is often inhibited by inertia, fear, self-doubt, isolation, or apathy. These feelings don't just go away by being told to stop feeling that way, but rather, leaders must actually share stories that move people from feelings of stagnation to feelings of motivation - urgency, anger, solidarity and hope.

The language of emotion is the language of movement—they actually share the same root word.

Good stories are specific—they show, rather than tell. They evoke a very particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, texture, taste. The more you can communicate this specificity, the more power your story will have to engage others. Like a poem or a painting or a piece of music, it is the specificity of the experience that can give us access to the universal sentiment or insight they contain.

Inspired and adopted from New Organizing Institute & Marshall Ganz resources -- check them out for more!

CHALLENGES, CHOICES, OUTCOMES

You may think that your story doesn't matter, that people aren't interested, that you shouldn't be talking about yourself. But when you do public, community-based work, you have a responsibility to offer an account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead. **If you don't tell your own story, others will tell it for you.**

A good story public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the "plot" of your life – the challenges you have faced, choices you have made, and outcomes you have experienced.

Challenge: *Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it your challenge?*

Choice: *Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage – or not? Where did you get the hope – or not? How did it feel?*

Outcome: *How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel?*

A word about challenge. Sometimes we see the word "challenge": and think it means describing the worst and most difficult experiences and injustices in our lives. Sometimes those are indeed the moments that most shaped us. Keep in mind that struggles might also be of our own choosing -- a huge mountain you decided to climb, as much as a valley you managed to climb out of. **Many things may have been a challenge to you and can be the source of your story.**

A public story includes three elements:

Story of self: why you were called to what you have been called to, the values that move you to lead

Story of us: what your community or organization has been called to -- your shared values, purposes, goals, vision, motivation

Story of now: the urgent challenge we are called to face, the hopeful outcome we can create together, the choice we must make to act now

DEVELOPING YOUR STORY

Take the time to reflect on your own stories, beginning with your story of self. Grab a notebook, grab a friend, really let yourself brainstorm. Start with your family and your upbringing. Where did you grow up? What do you remember about that place? What was important or meaningful about it, or not? *What made your parents or grandparents the people they became? How did their choices influence your own? What are particular-- seemingly large or small -- choices that stand out in your life? Why?*

Let yourself reflect and brainstorm. Use the following questions as a guide -- don't expect yourself to directly answer all of them. See them as building blocks of many potential stories -- right now, just start laying out some of these experiences and see what inspires you. Then play with those building blocks to construct your public narrative -- a story that links your stories of self, us, and now.

Try drawing pictures here instead of words. Powerful stories leave your listeners with images in their minds that shape their understanding of you and your calling.



STORY OF SELF

Learning to tell a good story of self demands the courage of introspection -- courageously "going deep" into your values and motivations (why you do what you do) and sharing those findings with others

- *What childhood memories link you to people, places, or events that you value? What images, smells, or sounds do these evoke?*
- List every job or project you have participated in that connects to these values -- or not. Be expansive -- youth projects and groups, school activities, classes, extracurriculars, family projects, moments of clarity & meaning. *What are the connections or themes that emerge? What do they say about you?*
- *What was the last time you spent a day doing something you love? What about it made you want to spend the day that way? What was memorable? What particular sound or sight do you recall from that day?*
- *What has someone said to you recently that really provoked you? Inspired you? Made you angry? Why?*
- *Who has most influenced your choice to be here, doing what you are doing now? What about their involvement in your life made a difference? Why do you think it was important for them to do so?*

Some of the moments you recall may be painful, some may be hopeful. You may have felt excluded, put down, or powerless, as well as courageous, recognized, and inspired. Attend to your moments of "challenge" as well as moments of "hope." Consider how you can articulate these moments in ways that allow others to understand who you are. A combination of challenge and hopefulness creates that energy for change.

STORY OF US

A good story of us requires the courage of empathy -- to consider the experience of others deeply enough to take a chance at articulating that experience

- We are all part of multiple "us's" -- families, cultures, neighborhoods, schools, nations, organizations, faiths, etc.
- *With whom do you share a common past? With whom do you share a common future? Do you participate in this community as a result of fate, or choice, or both? How like or unlike the experiences of others in the community do you believe your own experience to be?*
- *What makes your community a community -- what shared values, vision, purpose, goals, etc draw you together?*

STORY OF NOW

A story of now requires the courage of imagination, to both call attention to the pain of the world and also bravely articulate the possibility of a better future.

- We have learned about you, what motivates you to a particular cause & why, and who else is part of the community joining with you towards that cause. *So what action does that cause, and your values, require of you right here, right now, in this place?*
- *What urgent action might you call upon others to face? What specific action might you call upon us to take?*





Storytelling for Organizing: Coaching

A guide for coaching and workshopping stories for organizing

The best stories are developed with pairs or groups who can share and listen to each others' stories and coach each other through the narrative. Use this to guide you.

Remember to balance both positive and constructive critical feedback. The purpose of coaching is to listen to the way stories are told and think of ways that the storytelling could be improved.

DON'T simply offer vague "feel good" comments. ("That was a really great story!")

DO coach each other on the following points:

THE CHALLENGE:

What were the specific challenges the storyteller faced? Did the storyteller paint a vivid picture of those challenges?

"When you described _____, I got a clear picture of the challenge."

"I understood the challenge to be _____. Is that what you intended?"

THE CHOICE:

Was there a clear choice that was made in response to each challenge? How did the choice make you feel?

"To me, the choice you made was _____, and it made me feel _____."

"It would be helpful if you focused on the moment you made a choice."

THE OUTCOME:

What was the specific outcome that resulted from each choice? What does that outcome teach us?

"I understood the outcome was _____, and it teaches me _____. But how does it relate to your work now?"

THE VALUES:

Could you identify what this person's values are and where they came from? How? How did it make you feel?

"Your story made me feel _____ because _____."

"It's clear from your story that you value _____; but it could be even clearer if you told a story about where that value comes from."

DETAILS:

Were there sections of the story that had especially good details or images (e.g. sights, sounds, smells, or emotions of the moment)?

"The image of _____ really helped me identify with what you were feeling."

"Try telling more details about _____ so we can imagine what you were experiencing."

