

Solutions storytelling notes

Forum Title: Solutions Storytelling

Convenors: Stephen Silha, Sarah van Gelder

Who was present:

Sharon Sjerven, Essential Idea, Sharon@tcities.ca

Anne Erickson, TellTale Stories, anne@telltalestories.ca

James John Bell, SmartMeme Studios, james@smartmemestudios.com

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Stephen described his experience working for mainstream media, why he left after one summer at the *Minneapolis Star* and went to *The Christian Science Monitor*.

From the *Monitor*'s way of approaching Solutions storytelling:

- 1) Tell the story so that it could be told 5 days later
How plane crashes could be avoided?
- 2) Give people “handles” on the news, e.g., how you can learn more or get involved
- 3) Reporting from a futures perspective

But still – they believed in two sides (every story has two sides), when Stephen thought there should be conscious ways to represent more sides.

Years later Stephen met Sarah van Gelder- who understood solutions storytelling They worked together on a transition issue of *Yes!* Magazine.

Sarah: We are stuck in old paradigms of what is possible

Yes! is trying to show that there are other options – and that you can be involved

The old way is falling apart

What is that new thing that is emerging?

How can we contribute to fresh imagination by reframing our storytelling? What would it mean if we reported on the new ways that are struggling to be born with as much attention and rigor as most media focuses on the old ways that are dying?

Three levels of Solutions Storytelling

There are three ways to think about any solution-oriented story telling:

1) The immediate story – with specific implications: Understanding of a specific issue: e.g. impact of NAFTA on the Mexican food system. Information about how farmers are resisting and building alternatives. Models that can be replicated (e.g. fair trade co-ops) and supported. Specific ways that the reader can be involved.

2) The larger trends – the objective forces that are shaping our times.

For example, Globalization and its many impacts around the world. – global justice resistance movements, the relationship between resistance and building alternatives. The large environmental, economic, social justice, technology, and war&peace dynamics that influence nearly every story.

3) The big stories –the belief systems (or “memes”) that make sense of events. The subjective side. The struggle over the story of an event, for example 9/11, has huge influence on what happens next. The story about why working people are struggling, why the climate is changing, The subjective side of it – what do we believe about what is going on in the world and what power/rights/responsibilities we have to affect what happens?

For example, one belief: **TINA**: There Is No Alternative to global corporate capitalism, and all that goes with it (coined by Margaret Thatcher). The implication: don't even try to change this system.

We can show with our stories that in fact the seeds of a new society are being created every day. And that activism and the building of alternative and autonomous spaces is having a huge impact – many peoples are taking an entirely different direction.

Another belief set: The **Liberal story** – focuses on the oppressed and the victimized, shown as passive objects but rarely as the *subjects* of the story. The implication is that some beneficent person, organization, or social system may help, but that the oppressed will remain the passive beneficiaries or victims.

We can show that many poor and marginalized people are also taking a stand for their own liberation, and for the liberation of all, and are the active creators of the future. Implication: poor people, marginalized people are allies who are already a powerful force for change.

The **Conservative story** set: If you are poor– you are less worthy, because, in the Calvinist world view, those who work hard and act righteously are rewarded with wealth (and are loved best by God).

We can show that wealth concentrates in fewer and fewer hands because of an economic system that has concentration built in, and a political system that is most responsive to economic power.

In the *Yes!* story, victims become the protagonists
Solidarity is good strategy.

One of the big stories, even in liberal press – is “you can't take action” --“this is too complex” We show that people are plenty smart enough to take on complex questions.

Readers get a sense of hope in reading *Yes!* magazine. Grievances aren't enough to start

social movements. Grievances, piled on grievances can lead to despair. But grievances coupled with hope, with connection to others, and with examples of others who are changing their circumstances can start social movements.

If you are able to “see” the dominant belief system, and to recognize it as one of a number of possible belief systems – it is already on the way out.

People who immerse themselves in other cultures often see that the narrative and belief system of each culture is different, and thus, are more able to reflect on their own.

Today, the belief systems, especially in North America, may be changing more quickly than the institutions that structure our lives. There is extraordinary inertia in these institutions, and they are holding back progress.

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We then split into two groups to examine specific stories and see if we could shift their frame to a solutions-oriented approach.

Sarah and Stephen suggested these areas of inquiry:

Questions:

Is the reporter assuming the story is **polarized** to two sides? Or might there be perhaps more sides? Is the reporter assuming that the various stances are the familiar ones, e.g. jobs versus environment, and is that accurate?

Is there an assumption that everyone is representing **pre-ordained values** set: e.g. environmentalists, loggers, fundamentalists? Or are there other breakdowns that are more accurate?

Who is the protagonist? Who is passive and who is active? Is the reporter reinforcing power relationships by overlooking the strengths and active role of the oppressed, or failing to show the ways that the powerful can be affected by others?

What questions bring out the wisdom and creativity of the story subjects, such as this one: “**What’s possible now?**”

What can be **appreciated** in even the most difficult situation? How could we pay attention to the strengths within a tragic situation, and how does doing so change the story?

What are we **assuming about our audience** -- who they are and what they are looking for? What in our stories can the reader/listener/viewer use? What can support them in being the creators of their own future?

What are the deeper **objective systemic issues** involved, and how does the story help to illuminate them?

What are the deep stories, **mythologies**, cultural assumptions?

What is possible, building on people's strengths and aspirations, and the historical moment?

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Sally and Stephen looked at the Glacier Mining story on Maury Island. A big a-ha came when we considered changing the protagonist of the story from poor islanders threatened by Japanese mining corporation to the ecological balance of Maury Island.

A second group looked at a small town facing a water privatization plan, and how they were able to reframe the story as about a community that loves and is committed to its watershed (rather than a story about being anti-corporate or careless about job creation). Also, we looked at how the multiple sides of a story allowed unexpected and powerful coalitions to form among people who were not accustomed to working together.