

TELLING THE DIFFERENCE

USING STORY
TO CHANGE SYSTEMS

BY
ELLA SALTMARSHE



FOREWORD

Stories shape the world and the world shapes stories. Writers, artists and people in power have long understood this. There's a famous portrait of Elizabeth I, painted in the 16th century. She wears a sumptuous dress sewn not with pearls, but with eyes and ears. It tells us she's a ruler who sees and hears everything, reinforcing a story of God-like wealth, beauty and control. But stories can also illuminate the possibilities of change. They can show us what is wrong with the world as it is and how we might reshape it for the better. Stories can connect people across difference and inspire action and hope.

Here at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, we have been exploring new ways of communicating why the ocean matters in order to secure better management and protection. In 2017, we published *Getting below the Surface*, a FrameWorks Institute report into how people in the UK think about the ocean; the underlying stories that shape their understanding in more, or often less, helpful ways. Some of the findings are surprising - even counterintuitive. We found, for example, that focusing too much on the dangers that face the ocean triggers apathy not action. It is the stories of hope that inspire people.

Understanding what stories are doing is critical if we are to make real progress, which is why we are delighted to have supported the writing and publication of Ella Saltmarsh's report, *Telling the Difference*, a story about stories. Its aim is modest: to trigger conversation and collaboration. But it does more. With an admirably light touch, it sets out the story 'landscape' - why and how stories can be used and who is using them - so we can more easily navigate the possibilities of story and make sense of the world in new ways, influencing culture, ideas and action for positive social and environmental change.

Louisa Hooper
Environment Programme Manager
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch)

INTRODUCTION

In Liverpool, UK, at the end of another long day at a homeless hostel, an exhausted worker puts her head in her hands. The system she works in is failing the people it is supposed to serve and she feels powerless to change it...



Story as light: The role of story in illuminating the lay of land (past, present and future), specifically (i) highlighting the faultlines in a system and making visceral cases for change; (ii) illuminating outliers and building a coherent narrative around their work; (iii) shining a light on visions of the future that change the way people act in the present.

In Qatar at the end of another long day constructing a new stadium for the World Cup, a group of migrant workers return to a filthy overcrowded camp for a few hours rest. Trapped into forced labour, they are dying in record numbers...



Story as glue: The use of story as a community-building tool that enables people (i) to connect across difference and (ii) to create narratives that hold together groups, organisations and movements.

In Singapore at the end of another long day, a group of scientists, policymakers and NGOs are still trying to understand how to build a resilient agricultural system. They are searching for a common vision, but are struggling to agree on anything at all...



Story as web: The role of story in re-authoring the nest of narratives in which we live, changing (i) the personal narratives we have about our lives, (ii) the cultural narratives that frame the issues we campaign on, and (iii) the mythic narratives that embed our worldview.

Over the following pages we will discover how each of these scenarios illustrates the role of story in changing systems. Systems are made, propped up and brought down by stories. Stories shape how we understand the world, our place in it and our ability to change it.

This article is a field-guide to three key qualities of story and narrative that can be harnessed to change systems:

ON SYSTEMS CHANGE

“If a factory is torn down, but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory. If a revolution destroys a government, but the systematic patterns of thought that produced that government are left intact, then those patterns will repeat themselves. There’s so much talk about the system. And so little understanding.”

Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

In these volatile and uncertain times, there is increasing recognition that tackling urgent, complex problems such as climate change, inequality and health-care, requires a systems approach.¹

Every aspect of our lives is embedded in a system, from the food we eat, to the water we drink, to the publications we read. The systems we inhabit aren’t designed, but emerge over time in an unruly blend of actions and reactions between different players and structures. As systems develop they gradually take on a solid appearance: patterns, behaviours and structures become the landscape and the informal rules of the game. These in turn become self-reinforcing, as if ‘this

is just the way things are’. In reality, systems are never static: they are mind-bending webs of feedback loops, multiple relationships and shifting conditions. We can seek to influence systems, but cannot expect to change them in linear ways.

One way of understanding systems is to see them as consisting of three key parts: elements, interconnections and a function or purpose. That is, a system is a set of *things* that are *connected* to achieve *something*. The elements of a system can be tangible things like objects, buildings, people and organisations, and intangible things like culture and knowledge. Taking tennis as a system, its *elements* are the players, the coach, the umpire, the courts, the rackets and the ball. The *interconnections* are the rules of the game, the coach’s strategy, and the relationships between different players. The *purpose* is to win games, make a fortune, get fit, or achieve all of the above. The work of systems change involves *seeing* systemically (looking at the elements, interconnections and wider purpose) and *acting* systemically.

In her seminal work, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*, Donella Meadows² highlights how the most profound changes in a system come from changing its purpose. Staying with the tennis metaphor: change the umpires or the court and you’ll still be playing tennis, but change the aim of the game to bombarding spectators with tennis balls and although all the elements remain the same, the game becomes

unrecognisable. When it comes to changing the values, mindsets, rules and goals of a system, story is foundational.

ON STORY & NARRATIVE

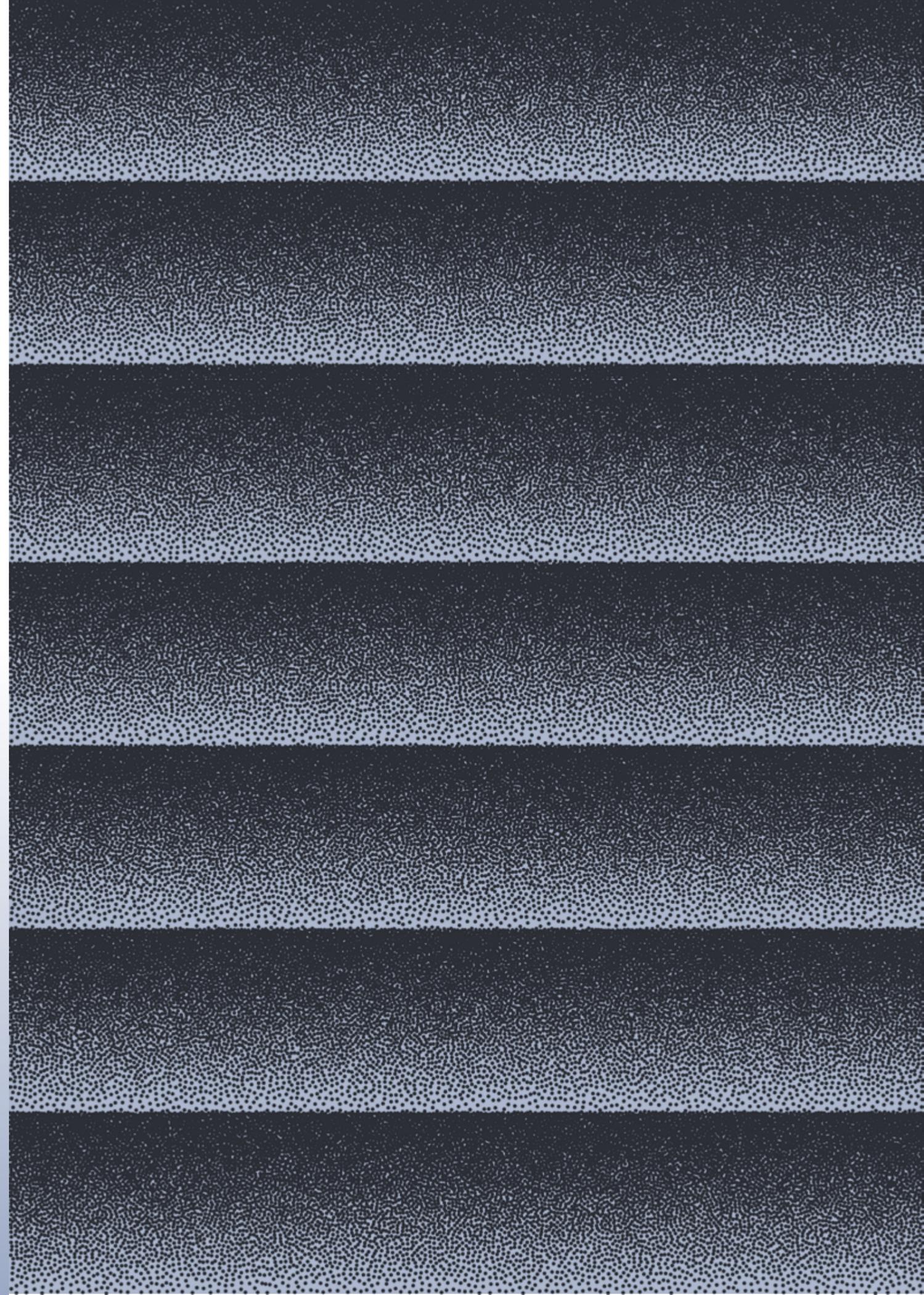
In its broadest sense, a story is the recounting of anything. In a technical sense, story involves three key elements: character, setting and plot, i.e. someone, somewhere, doing something. A narrative is simply 'a set of connected events', usually where one thing causes another. Although often used interchangeably, story and narrative are different. Narratives are overarching ideas and themes that can be represented by an infinite number of different stories. In the words of the Narrative Initiative, "Stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning."³

Stories have always been the way we've made sense of our chaotic world. Myths are particular types of stories that help us understand our origins and the world. When, in order to survive, our ancestors had to kill the animals they felt were kindred spirits, they created myths to help them come to terms with it. When they invented agriculture, they also invented myths that glorified graft and highlighted the seasonal nature of existence. When humans began to settle in larger numbers, they invented myths that imbued cities with transcendence.⁴ Story went on to play a vital social role in building civilisations, as Yuval

Noah Harari describes:⁵ "How did Homo Sapiens manage to cross the critical threshold eventually founding cities comprising tens of thousands of inhabitants and empires ruling hundred of millions? The secret was probably the appearance of fiction. Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths."

Story has many different qualities that make it useful for the work of systems change. It's a direct route to our emotions, and therefore critical to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It coheres communities. It engenders empathy across difference. And it enables the possible to feel probable in ways our rational minds can't comprehend.

This is a field-guide about how to use story and narrative to change systems. It's themed into three areas: story as light, story as glue and story as web.



STORY AS LIGHT

ILLUMINATING THE CRACKS

“So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”

Abraham Lincoln to author
Harriet Beecher Stowe

When Uncle Tom’s Cabin was first published in 1854, it outsold the Bible. Printing presses had to be kept open 24 hours a day to keep up with public demand for the book often called ‘the first bestseller’. Written by abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, its emotional portrayal of the cruelty of slavery roused abolitionist support in the North and galvanised the South to fiercely defend it, leading to Lincoln’s legendary (if unverified) comment in the midst of the Civil War. While the book’s treatment of race has since come under fire, its systemic significance is incontrovertible.

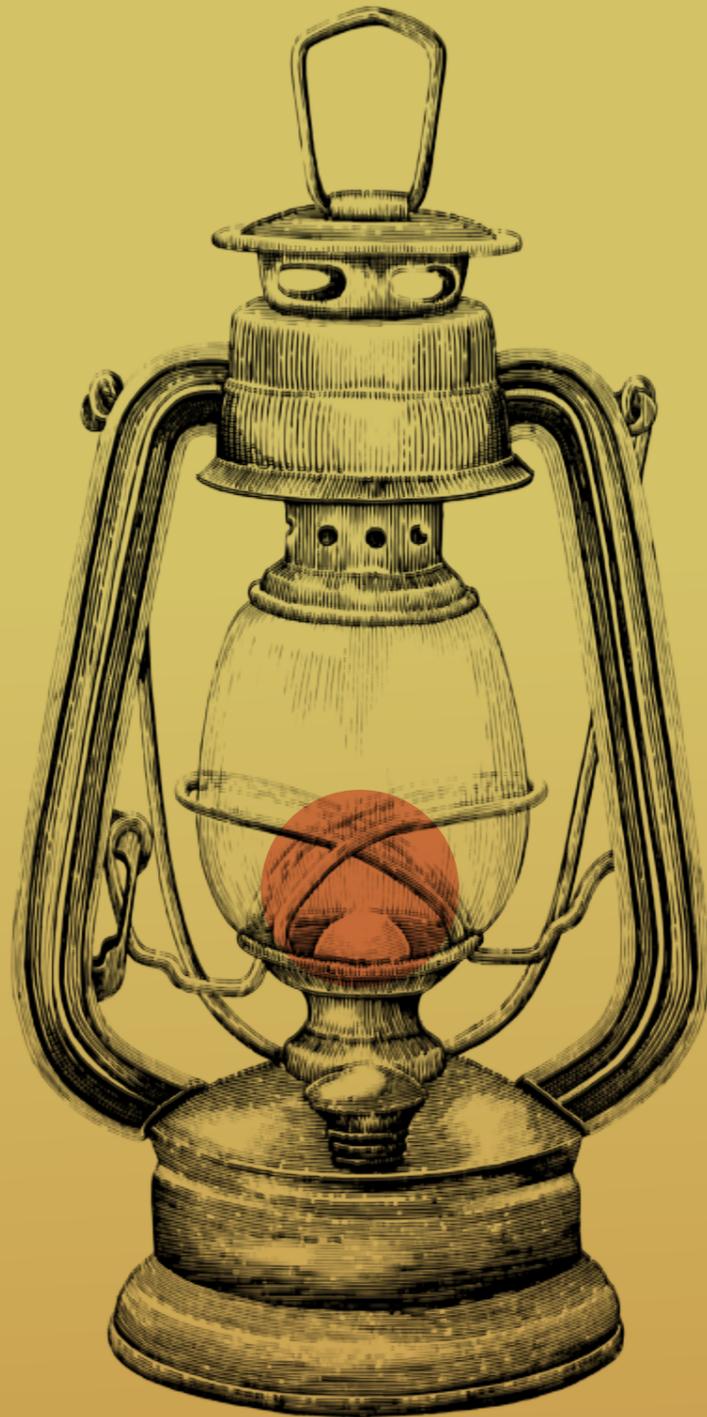
Today, initiatives like The Guardian’s Modern-day Slavery in Focus Project use personal stories to communicate systemic issues to mass audiences, often leading directly to change. In September 2013, the Modern-day Slavery project broke the story about slave labour in World Cup construction in Qatar. Journalists revealed how migrant workers, trapped into forced labour, were dying in unprecedented numbers while working impossible hours in temperatures of up to 50C

(122F) and denied access to drinking water.

After the story broke, FIFA Chief Sepp Blatter raised the scandal with the Emir of Qatar, leading the country to promise to reform its labour laws. The Modern-day Slavery team stayed on the story and a wider campaign developed. In March 2016 the United Nations issued a warning giving Qatar twelve months to end migrant worker slavery and in late 2017, the Qatari government committed to amending their labour laws to help stop labour exploitation. Although there is still a long way to go when it comes to ending slave labour in Qatar, it is clear that the illuminating power of stories can galvanise movements for systemic change.

The Modern-day Slavery in Focus Project is systemic in that their stories connect individual experiences to the factors responsible for the problems, and to possible solutions. In their efforts to humanise issues, all too often campaigners only use close-up portraits when telling stories. While these personal stories can be compelling, they don’t encourage people to think more widely about public solutions to social problems.

The FrameWorks Institute have produced a [comprehensive guide](#)⁶ on using a wide-angle lens to tell stories for social change. This systemic



approach means connecting personal stories with the answers to bigger questions such as:

- What are the conditions responsible for the problem?
- What is the impact on wider society?
- Is there a need to change laws, policies, and programs?
- Who is working to change this?
- What are the opportunities for collective engagement?



The rise of interactive storytelling is enabling systemic storytelling. Medium's "[Ghost Boat](#)"⁷ wove the systemic and personal together, involving readers in a quest to find out what happened to a 'refugee boat' that went missing in the Mediterranean with 243 passengers. The New York Times' "[10 Years After Katrina](#)"⁸ tells a rich, systemic story tracking the ways New Orleans has changed since Hurricane Katrina. ProPublica's award-winning interactive "[Insult to Injury](#)"⁹ on workers' compensation benefits resulted in new legislation. Wide-angled approaches enable the public to attribute responsibility more accurately and to think more systemically about solutions.

Technology also enables more participatory storytelling. In New Zealand, the We Are Beneficiaries campaign shines light on the cracks in the welfare system. The Facebook group invites artists who have received public benefits to draw a picture of themselves and write short stories about their experience with the welfare system. The online campaign went viral and spread to billboards across the country, sparking a national conversation.

ILLUMINATING THE LANDSCAPE

"The future is already here - it's just not very evenly distributed."

William Gibson

Supporting niches of innovation is another critical part of systems change. This not only affects the *elements* in a system, but can also transform the nature of the *connections* and, ultimately, the *purpose* of the system.

A core part of this work involves illuminating outliers: the mavericks, pioneers and intrapreneurs who are already trying to make change happen. Story plays two important roles here. First, systems changers can increase the profile and impact of outliers by amplifying their stories. Second, we can use story to create unifying narratives of change, adding momentum to movements.

Illuminating and connecting niches of innovation is a core part of our

strategy at The Comms Lab, a systems change organisation focused on the advertising industry. We do this by mapping the green shoots of [change](#)¹⁰ happening across the industry, producing [briefings](#)¹¹ with stories of how the industry is embracing purpose, publishing [reports](#)¹² mapping stories of cause-related innovation, and hosting events where industry innovators share their stories of change. We use individual stories to build evidence of what we call 'a wave of purpose disruption' that is sweeping the industry, drawing analogies between this and previous waves of change like globalisation and digitalisation. This work of connecting the dots and creating a bigger narrative around them is critical to building a movement of change within the industry.

Illuminating and amplifying outliers is a major part of many other systemic initiatives. The Finance Innovation Lab, for example, [builds](#) "awareness of the emerging alternatives in finance and the root causes of problems"¹³ and Tech for Good Global shines a light on technology that has social impact.

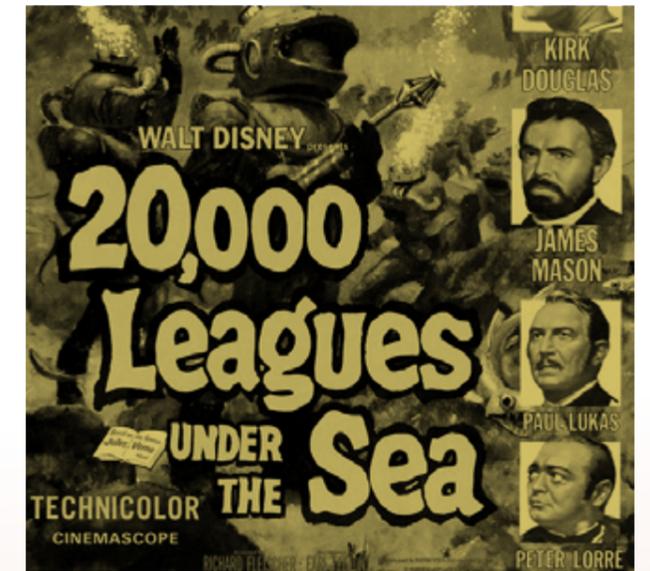
ILLUMINATING THE FUTURE

"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves."

William Shakespeare

Systems change can involve painting compelling visions of alternative futures. Here, story can be used to create immersive scenarios of the

future that engage people emotionally and intellectually. This work can make the possible feel more probable, create new perspectives that challenge the goals and mindsets of a system, and enable the transformation of rules and processes.



From Thomas More's Utopia to Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea to Blade Runner, we've been entertained by stories of the future for hundreds of years. Increasingly people are trying to use the imaginative capacity of story to create visions of the future that change how people act in the present. Take Carnage, a recent feature-length BBC mockumentary about veganism by comedian Simon Amstell. It is set in 2067 in a world where meat, eggs, and dairy are outlawed and teenagers weep at the thought of their grandparents' "carnist" pasts. The Independent newspaper's TV reviewer [wrote](#), "I'm not a vegan, but after watching Carnage, I'm even more certain that I should be,"¹⁴ while another critic [wrote](#) that it made "veganism seem more optimistic than sanctimonious."¹⁵

Within the field of systems change, practitioners are increasingly inspired by such examples. Charlene Collison works at the sustainability non-profit, Forum for the Future, and has spent years thinking about story's role in helping people realise that their actions in the present are responsible for shaping the future. "A lot of scenarios are dry and normative," Collison said in an interview. "I'm interested in how we can use robust futures data to create more immersive experiences, where participants don't only experience that future on a head level, but also as a whole-body/whole person experience. Something happens when people connect emotionally and suddenly realise that this is about their children."

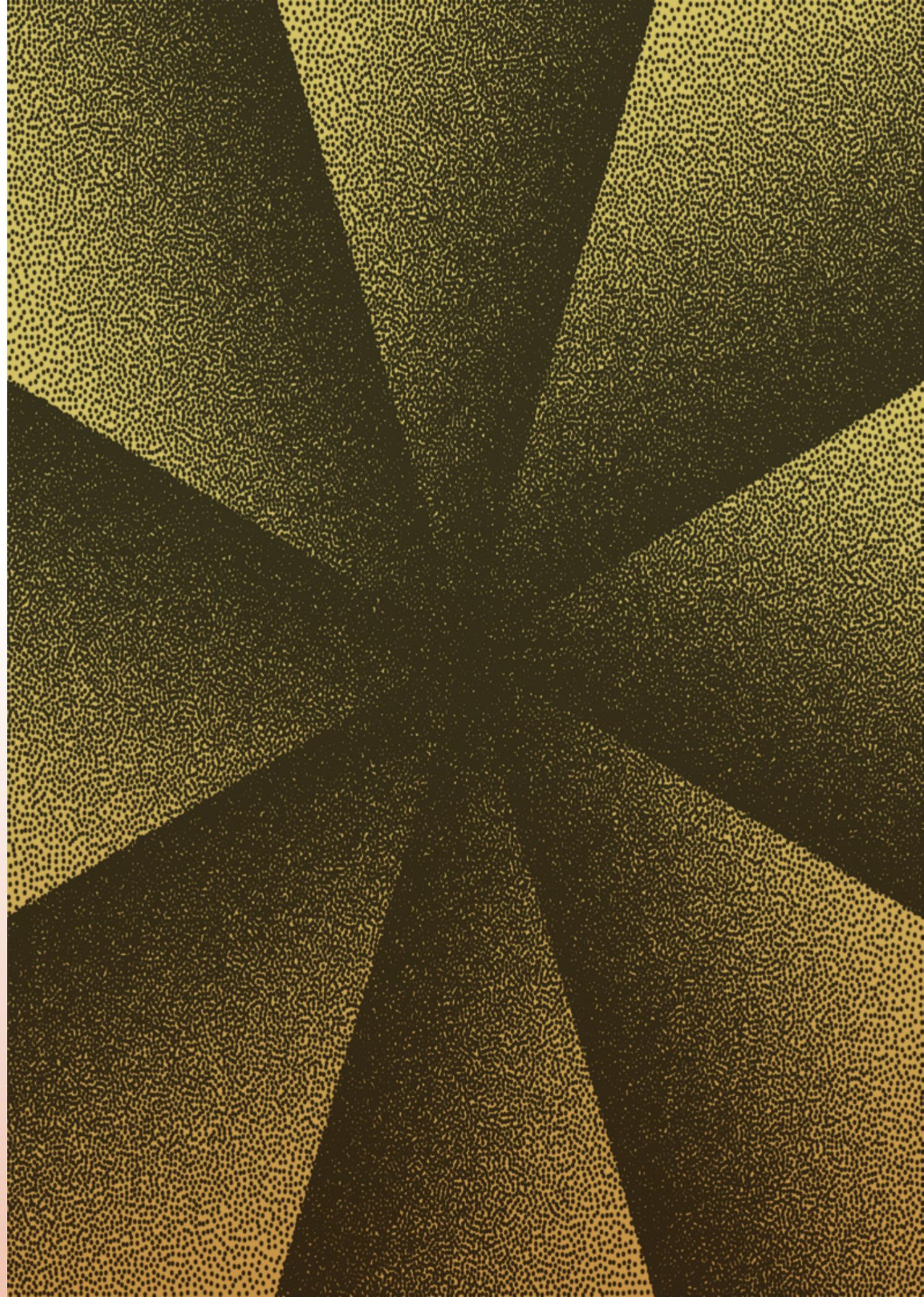
Borrowing techniques from theatre, Collison uses components of story like archetypes and imagery to help participants visualise visceral futures. One recent project with theatre pioneer Annette Mees involved creating an immersive experience for attendees of an agriculture conference in Singapore, simulating a scenario where they were on the 2030 Nobel Prize Committee.

Mees has a toolbox of simple exercises to engage people in futures-thinking, such as Future Jobs, where participants talk about their superpowers (skills) and mastermind subjects (interests), and then use this information to create fantasy jobs for each other in the future scenario being explored; or 24-Hours, where participants create rich characters and then imagine a day in their lives in a

particular future scenario. All Mees' processes are strongly rooted in the character development and story skills of her theatre training.

The playfulness of these processes enables participants to lose the inhibitions that might previously have discouraged them from imagining.

Combining futures thinking and creativity is a growing area. The 2017 Oxford Futures Forum focused on marrying the theory and practice of scenario planning with art, literature, design and transmedia. Organisers felt this would "broaden the range of people engaged, and the modes of action inspired, by such futures."¹⁶



STORY AS GLUE

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH EMPATHY

“We are lonesome animals. We spend all of our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say and to feel, ‘Yes, that is the way it is, or at least that is the way I feel it.’ You are not as alone as you thought.”

John Steinbeck

Story engenders empathy. It is the best tool we have for understanding what it must feel like to be someone else. Systems change frequently involves collaboration across difference. The empathetic quality of story is vital when bringing together, say, commercial fisheries executives and environmental activists, or bankers and fair-finance campaigners. It enables very different people to discover their shared values and connect to each other as humans, rather than as professionals. “Systems change is deeply personal and involves thinking about the glasses you’re given when born,” says Rachel Sinha, founder of systems change practice The Systems Studio. “To change systems you need to change your glasses and see the world from other people’s perspectives. Story helps you do this.”

Sharing individual stories can help people develop new perspectives on the system they share, as veteran systems practitioner David Stroh described in an interview, “It’s like the story of the blind men and the elephant. Everyone only sees their part of an elephant. They see the individual stories they tell themselves about what’s true. Sharing these helps them create a more expanded and accurate collective narrative. It enables them to develop a shared picture of reality.”

There is a deep craft to the work of using story to build empathy in groups, and many different methodologies.¹⁷ Common principles include creating safe physical and emotional spaces where those usually marginalised feel comfortable sharing their stories, ensuring people will be heard and respected, and using creative processes or story prompts to draw stories out of very different people.

Using story to build empathy doesn’t have to involve bringing people into the same room. Sometimes the role of the systems changer is to serve as an intermediary. “In stuck systems people have very set narratives about each other,” says Julian Corner, chief executive of the Lankelly Chase Foundation. In one community,



social services and families were at loggerheads. Parents saw social services as the people who took children away, while social workers viewed parents as uncooperative, hostile people who slammed doors in their faces. “It was very stuck,” explains Corner. One of Lankelly Chase’s grantees interviewed families and social workers and discovered that they wanted very similar support outcomes. Sharing these stories across the divide helped the two groups come together and co-create a new service. However, as Corner warns, “most of the rest of system still holds equivalent narratives so this brokering of conflicting narratives has to happen at every level.”

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH COHERENCE

“Any large-scale human cooperation—whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe—is rooted in common myths that only exist in people’s collective imagination.”

Yuval Noah Harari

Story plays an important role in cohering the groups and movements that are essential for systems change. Enabling disparate people to form communities is a key part of this work. I saw this on a micro-scale at Systems Changers, a programme run by the Point People and Lankelly

Chase, which works with frontline workers focused on issues such as homelessness, addiction, mental health and domestic violence. When we took the programme’s first cohort to the People’s Museum in Manchester, one of the participants reacted by saying, “Although I knew about movements like the suffragettes, it really brought home to me that change is possible. It made me realise why we were doing the programme. It made me realise this is how people start movements.” Hearing the stories of other movements enabled her to reconsider the new network of which she was a part, redefining the group as a movement, which in turn was part of a long history of movements. The New Economic Organisers Network (NEON) has created Stories of Struggle¹⁸ to help people fighting for social justice situate their work within the wider historical context of movements for change in the UK.



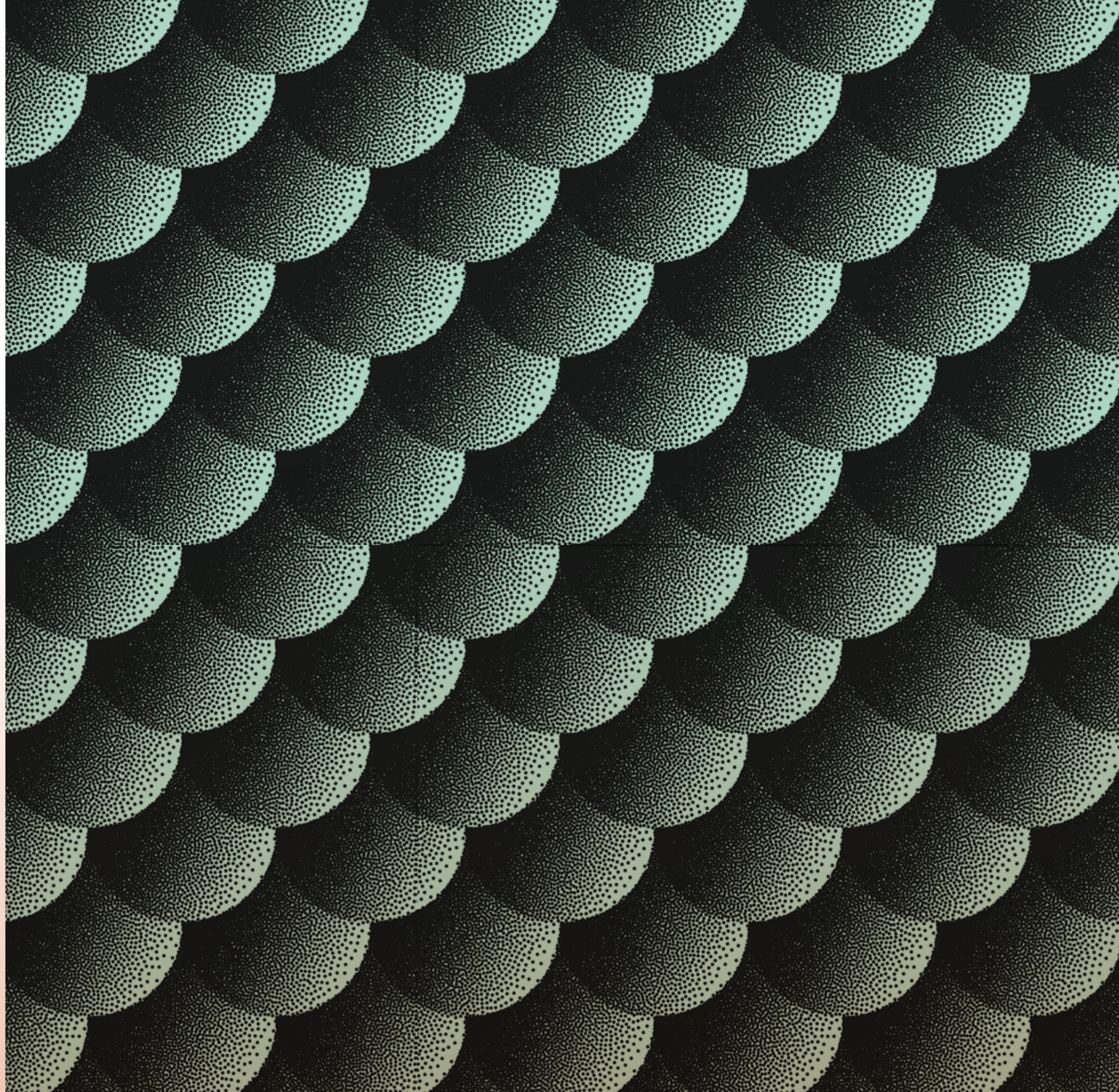
Enabling individuals to connect their personal stories to stories of community is at the heart of the public narrative¹⁹ work pioneered by veteran organiser Marshall Ganz. Charlotte Millar, co-founder of the Finance Innovation Lab and Head of Training with NEON, described in an interview how Ganz’s work – connecting stories of self to stories of us and stories of

now – has been integral to her own leadership development work: “This work of authoring a compelling story about yourself, your community, and the need for urgent action, is integral to creating movements. Without a common story, movements lack a narrative about why they exist and will fail to generate a sense of belonging amongst their members.”



Movement strategy and research organisation, the Ayni Institute, talk about the DNA of movements, of which story is a key component. They describe the importance of developing a DNA that is both tight and enabling, allowing both coherence and distributed leadership. This is a question that Tech for Good Global is grappling with: its London meet-ups now have 6,000 members and they are spreading across the UK to Manchester, Cambridge, Birmingham, Bath, Bristol, and Glasgow. Co-founder Cassie Robinson says they want “to foster shared language and a common understanding.” For that to happen, she asks, “what’s the minimum viable story that creates enough coherence and also allows for different places to have their own version?”

We no longer live in a world of passively inherited stories – instead we are increasingly creating, curating and sharing them on a daily basis. As movement-builders our work is to find the right balance between structure and openness, both creating stories that build communities and encouraging others actively to author their own.



STORY AS WEB

CHANGING OUR WEB OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES

“If you’re born into that situation, the nature of the trap is with your not even knowing it, acquiescing. You’ve been taught that you’re inferior so you act as though you’re inferior. And on the level that is very difficult to get at, you really believe it. And, of course, all the things you do to prove you’re not inferior only really prove you are. They boomerang... You’re playing the game according to somebody else’s rules, and you can’t win until you understand the rules and step out of that particular game, which is not, after all, worth playing.”

James Baldwin

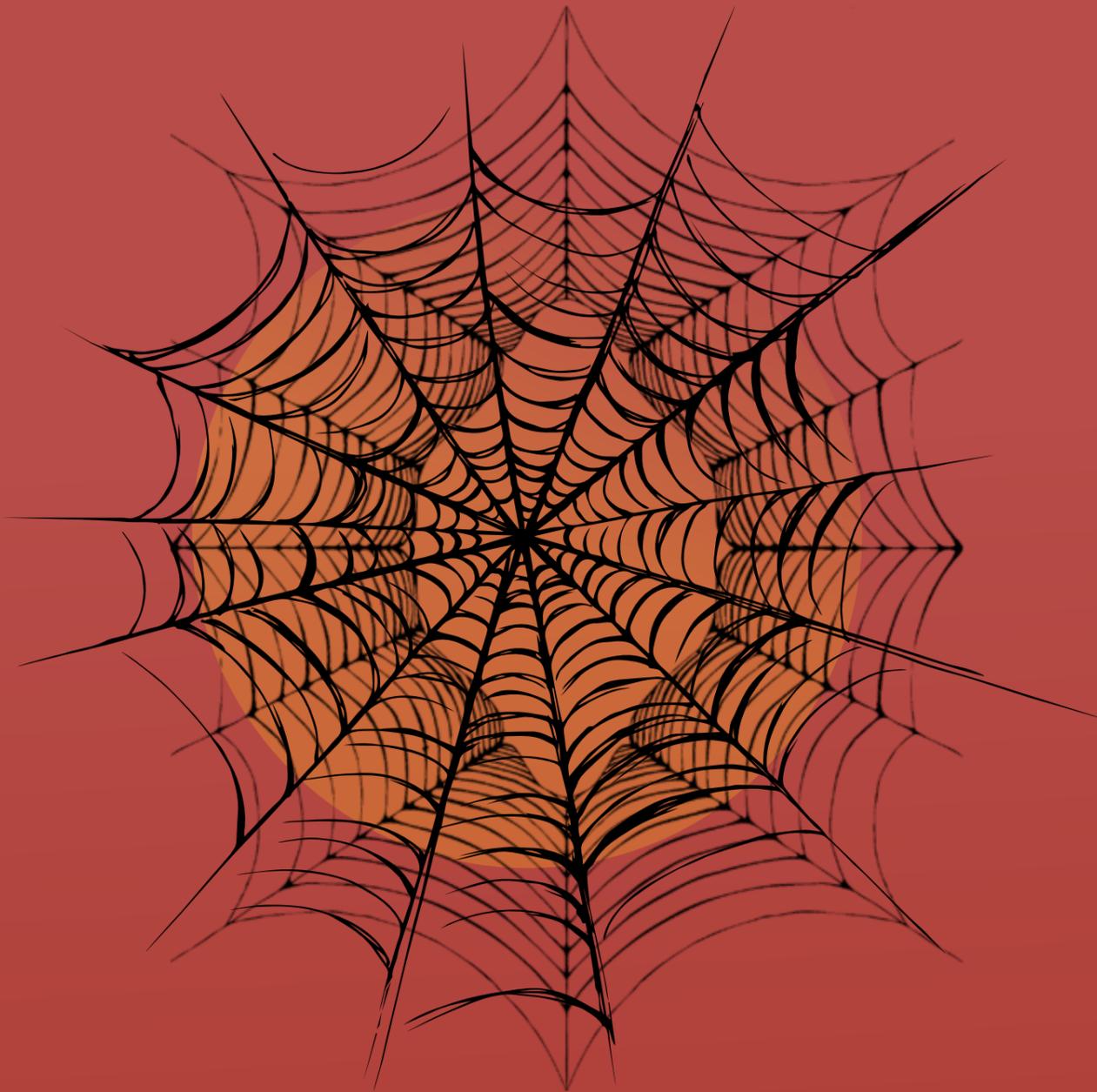
We often fail to see the stories that govern our lives. If we want to change specific systems, we first need to make mirrors that enable us to see the narratives we currently live by, and then author new narratives that enable the kind of change we want to see in the world.

Here, there is much that systems change practitioners can learn from

narrative [therapists](#)²⁰ who work to illuminate the stories that govern our lives by unpacking them, examining their origins and impacts, and then helping people author more positive stories to live by.

Recognising the impact of dominant narratives and developing the skills to author new ones can catapult people from a place of acceptance (of the system and their role in it) to a place of action. As systems changers, a key task is enabling people to find their agency and understand that they are not passive recipients of history. Charlotte Millar explains the importance of this work: “We invite people to reflect on the systems that shape their lives. This process is powerful in giving people a critical awareness of who they are and of the wider structural forces affecting their own personal story.”

Toronto-based In With Forward uses tools from narrative therapy to create interventions that get to the bottom of social challenges like poverty, homelessness, and addiction. They work on multiple levels: at the micro level, they help enable vulnerable people to reframe their personal stories and recognise their own internal resources; at a meso-level, they adapt physical environments like drop-in centres and shelters to reinforce these alternative narratives; and at a macro-level, they aim to influence the narratives held by



policymakers and the public, so that the aspirations of the vulnerable people they work with are met with real structural opportunities.

CHANGING OUR WEB OF CULTURAL NARRATIVES

“Story is for human as water is for fish – all encompassing and not quite palpable.”

Jonathan Gottschall

From a cultural perspective, the stories we live in justify the status quo, make institutions feel inevitable, legitimise certain kinds of solutions and make the world we live in feel preordained. From immigration to security to taxation, these cultural narratives are foundational: they affect our norms, who we think of as insiders and outsiders, who is deserving and undeserving, and why our world looks the way it does.

As campaigners realise the power of cultural narratives, we are experiencing a surge in reframing projects on everything from criminal justice, to poverty to oceans. This is the reason that I recently found myself in a packed room at a conference shouting out words like ‘machine’, ‘weather’ and ‘purse’. This game of Economic Metaphor Bingo was part of the Framing the Economy project, a partnership between the Public Interest Research Centre, NEON, the FrameWorks Institute & the New Economics Foundation. It aims to

help social movements in the UK tell a better, more compelling story about what the economy is for, how it’s broken, and how it can be fixed.

The FrameWorks Institute is a pioneer when it comes to shifting cultural narratives to bring about better social and environmental outcomes. They have developed a process called Strategic Frame Analysis to do this. First, they analyse the way that experts and the news media report an issue, and the assumptions the public forms around that issue. Then they use this analysis to develop new framing, metaphors, and examples, before carrying out usability trials where issue-advocates test out the new frameworks to see how they work in practice. The results can be transformational. One of their analyses resulted in the term ‘toxic stress’, which has become central to describing the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on the brain; their phrase, ‘a heat-trapping blanket’, conveying the science behind global warming, was integrated into the way the Environmental Protection Agency describe climate change.

Given that our cultural narratives are so powerful and emotive, it makes sense to use the power and emotive force of culture to alter them. On Road Media’s ‘All About Trans’ campaign is changing how the media portrays transgender people in the UK through facilitating more positive relationships between them and culture-makers. This has resulted in a new BBC transgender drama, trans storylines in long-running soap operas, and

new Independent Press Standards Organisation guidelines on reporting transgender stories.



In the US, the Pop Culture Collaborative is a new hub formed to accelerate this kind of work, with grantees using popular culture to change narratives around race, immigration and care. Take the example of Define American, which works with news and entertainment media to shift the conversation around immigration. Their multi-pronged strategy includes working with entertainment industry executives, showrunners and writers to help them develop more realistic immigrant characters and navigate complex immigration-related storylines. And as a result of their #WordsMatter campaign, major national media outlets have prohibited the use of the word ‘illegal’ when referring to undocumented Americans.

CHANGING OUR MYTHIC WEB

“All cultures... are founded on myths. What these myths have given has been inspiration for aspiration.”

Joseph Campbell.

Myths are the meta-stories we use to explain the universe and our place within it. The mythologist Joseph Campbell describes myth as having four functions: (i) mystical – awakening a sense of awe; (ii) cosmological – describing the shape of the universe (iii) sociological – validating a certain social order; and (iv) pedagogical – guiding us through life’s stages.²¹ As Yuval Noah Harari describes in his book, Sapiens, to be human is to live in myth: our civilisations have always been embedded in them. Working with myth is integral to the work of changing the values, mindsets, rules and goals of a system. These stories have a deep effect on our psyche and collective direction of travel.

Today, the systemic power of myth is brutally visible in extremist groups, from the heady theology of Islamic State’s tweets, videos and essays, to the mythic underpinnings of contemporary Neo-Nazism. Some suggest that alongside this potent use of myth by extremist forces, liberal democracies are facing a ‘myth gap’. As FSG managing director Mark Kramer writes, “The challenge today is not merely that we have dysfunctional systems nor that we lack innovative solutions to our society’s problems. Instead, it’s that our country has no

unifying narrative that binds us all to a common fate."²²

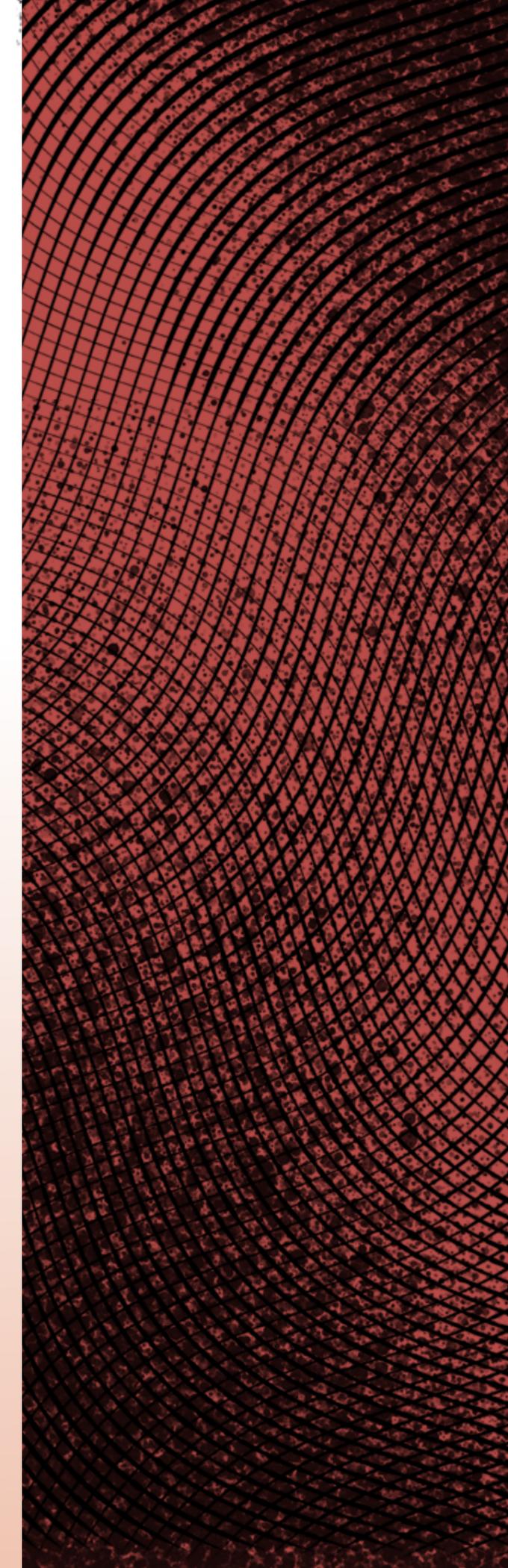
There is a growing number of initiatives designed to stimulate new meta-narratives. One of these was the New Story Summit in 2014, which brought together hundreds of people from across the globe to 'support the emergence of a coherent new story for humanity'. The event didn't result in a singular coherent new story, but rather highlighted common themes in different story traditions, such as interdependence with the natural world. It left one of the lead facilitators asking whether it's even possible to engineer new myths. In an interview Robin Alfred asked: "Can stories of the magnitude and potency that we need be written in the same way as, say, a novel or short story? Or do they emerge from the zeitgeist, from the culture, from the ethic of the time?" The New Story Summit showed both the problems that emerge in a search for a single narrative and the value in exploring the common themes in diverse mythic narratives.

In *The Myth Gap*,²³ Alex Evans develops this notion of the common principles that need to underpin new myths. Evans believes that we can use "our powers of collective storytelling to imagine a future in which it all goes right, creating a myth about redemption and restoration that adds up, if you like, to an Eden 2.0." But rather than try and create this story himself, he outlines three principles for 21st century myths: a larger us, a longer now, and a better good life.

Jane Riddiford demonstrates these mythic principles in very practical ways. Her educational charity, Global Generation, works on community integration in central London connecting residents with businesses, developers and the natural world. The charity's HQ is the iconic Skip Garden, a moveable urban food garden in the middle of the King's Cross development site. Into this work Riddiford weaves stories linking the personal with the planetary using the I/We/Planet framework, which enables people to increase self-awareness, connect with each other and to the natural world. Sometimes she introduces the 'long now', when she brings together construction workers and local school children for bread-making sessions. As they bake, they share stories that link the flour they are kneading to the birth of grain cultivation and back to the Big Bang. At Junior Chef Club, school children reflect on their interconnectedness with nature through the ingredients they pick, chop, and cook. When employees from local businesses like Eurostar, The Guardian, and Kier come for leadership development, they are encouraged to think beyond their work to a bigger 'we'.

In all this, Riddiford is mindful of the balance between coherence and openness. "There is a tension between how much 'givenness' to put in there. We are careful of over-orchestrating. Instead, we want to create empty and fecund spaces for people to explore their own versions of ancient and emerging stories."

There is no doubt that myths can provide psychological and practical support to help us handle our complex and divided world. Riddiford highlights some of the tensions in contemporary myth-making: is it actually possible to create new myths? What's the balance between authorship and emergence? Who gets to participate in myth-making? Should our focus be the creation of new myths or the reinvigoration of old ones? One thing is clear: we need to develop new processes of collective storytelling to help us navigate these turbulent and polarising times.



END NOTE

“Stories matter. So do stories about stories.”

Clifford Geertz

This article has been a story about stories. It has outlined three important features of story that can contribute to systems change:

Story as light: Using the illuminating power of story to show the lay of the land (past, present and future)

Story as glue: Using story to build and cohere communities of change-makers

Story as web: Using story to change the nest of narratives in which we live

A key tension running through all this is that between orchestration and openness. We no longer live in a broadcast era where we must passively receive our stories en

masse. Instead, growing numbers of people have the means to be storytellers as well as story-listeners. As systems changers, we should seek to enable others to use story to illuminate the lay of their land, to cohere communities, and to reauthor the nest of narratives they live in. How can we enable more people to use this most ancient technology to change systems for the better?

We need more stories about stories in the field of systems change. There are many other examples, tools and ways of using of stories to be shared. This article is a celebration of some of the inspiring work already happening in this field, intended to trigger conversation and collaboration. I hope it will enable people to work together in new ways to use story to build a better world so that ‘living happily ever after’ exists off the page as well as on it.

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ELLA SALTMARSHÉ

Ella has a deep practical grounding in both narrative and systems change. She writes drama for stage and screen and is represented by The Agency. She co-founded The Point People, which works on systems change across sectors; The Comms Lab, a systems change lab focused on the advertising industry; and a range of creative campaigning initiatives like SHEvotes and Time To Vote. Her work on creativity and innovation has been published in The Guardian, Fast Company, The Financial Times, Creative Review, Wired and ID Magazine.



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