

Public Narrative

Public narrative is a leadership art through which we translate values into action: engaging heart, head, and hands. As narrative it is built from the experience of challenge, choice and outcome. As public narrative it is woven from three elements: a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now. Or, as Rabbi Hillel, the 1st Century Jerusalem sage put it, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?”

Story of Self

When we tell our own story, we teach the values that our choices reveal, not as abstract principals, but as our lived experience. We reveal the kind of person we are to the extent that we let others identify with us. The more specific our stories, the more powerfully we can communicate our values or what moral philosopher Charles Taylor calls our “moral sources.”

We construct stories of self around *choice points* – moments in our lives when we faced a challenge, had to make a choice, and experienced an outcome. We can access the values that motivate us by reflecting on these choice points, especially by telling them to another person who can give us feedback about what they are hearing. The other person often can “connect the dots” that we may not have connected because they are too obvious to us. By choosing among the stories of our own choice points, we can communicate our values most clearly to others.

A story is like a poem. A poem moves not by how long it is, nor how eloquent or complicated. A story or poem moves by offering an experience or moment through which we grasp the feeling that the poet communicates. The more specific the details we choose to recount, the more we can move our listeners.

Some of us think that our personal story doesn't matter, that others won't be interested, or that we shouldn't be talking about ourselves so much. **On the contrary, if we do public work we have a responsibility to give a public account of ourselves - where we came from, why we do what we do, and where we think we're going.**

We don't really have a choice about whether to have a Story of Self or not. If we don't author our story, others will – and they may tell our story in ways that we may not like. Not because they are malevolent, but because as others try to make sense of who we are, what we're up to and the why of our actions, they draw on their own experience, especially their experience of people they consider to be “like” us.

Story of Us

A public story is not only an account of the speaker's personal experience. All self stories are “nested,” including fragments of other stories drawn from our culture, our faith, our parents, our friends, the movies we've seen, and the books we've read. While individuals have their own stories, communities, movements, organizations and nations weave collective stories out of distinct threads. Our individual threads intersected on the day that Kennedy was assassinated or when we saw the planes hit the Twin Towers. We shared a crisis, and we learned the morals about how we are to act and how life is to be lived. Points of intersection become the focus of a shared story – the way we link individual threads into a common weave. A Story of Us brings forward the values that move us as a community.

How does the storyteller become part of this larger story? Learning to tell a Story of Us requires deciding who the “us” is -- which values shape that identity and which are most relevant to the situation at hand. Stories then not only teach us how to live, they also teach us how to distinguish who “we” are from “others,” reducing uncertainty about what to expect from our community. In the midst of treacherous weather, earthquakes, disease and other environmental sources of great unpredictability – the behavior, actions and reactions of the people among whom we live, and our shared stock of stories, gives us greater safety.

Our cultures are repositories of stories. Community stories about challenges we have faced, why we stood up to them -- our values and our shared goals -- and how we overcame them weave throughout our political beliefs and religious traditions. We tell community stories again and again as folk sayings, popular songs, religious rituals, and community celebrations

(e.g., Easter, Passover, 4th of July). Just like individual stories, collective stories can inspire hope or generate despair. We also weave new stories from old ones. The Exodus story, for example, served the Puritans when they colonized North America, but it also served Southern blacks claiming their civil rights in the freedom movement.

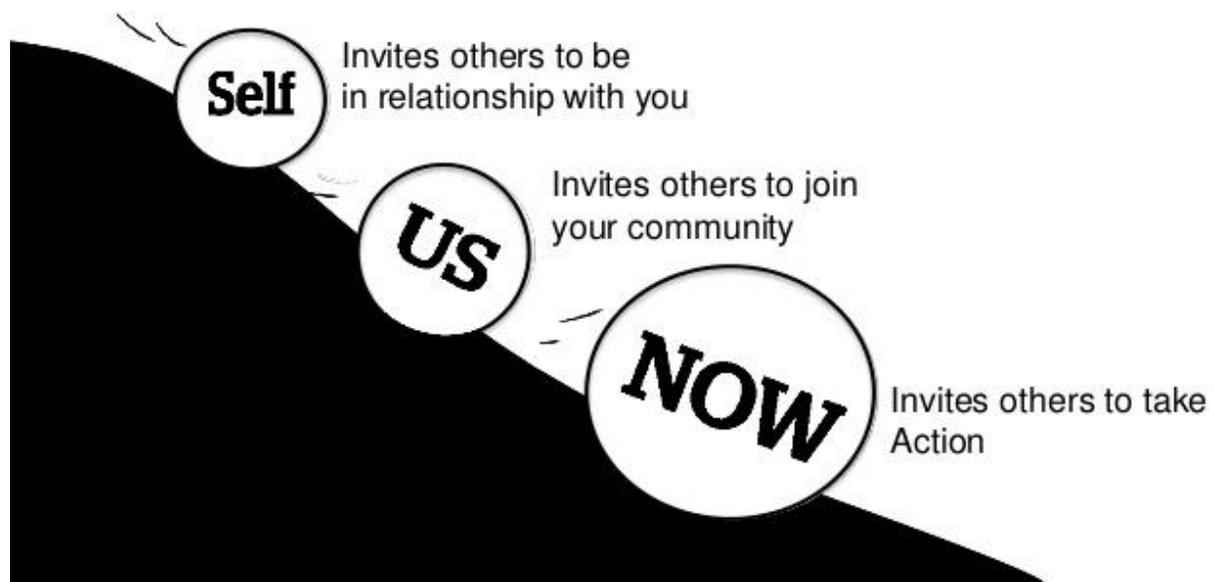
Organizations that lack a “story” lack an identity, a culture, core values that can be articulated and drawn upon to motivate. Leaders learn to tell the Story of Us – the story of their organization – by identifying the “choice points” of the organization’s journey, recounting experiences that communicate the values embedded in the work of the organization.

Story of Now

Stories of Now articulate the challenges we face now, the choices we are called upon to make, and the meaning of making the right choice. Stories of Now are set in the past, present and future. The challenge is now -- we are called upon to act because of our legacy and who we have become, and the action that we take now can shape our desired future.

These are stories in which we are the protagonists. We face a crisis, a challenge. It’s our choice to make. And we have a story of hope, if we make the right choice. The storyteller among us whom we have authorized to “narrativize” this moment finds a way to articulate our crisis and challenge as a choice, reminds us of our moral resources (our stories, stories of our family, our community, our culture, our faith), and offers a hopeful vision we can share as we take our first steps on the journey.

3 Parts of Public Narrative



Source: Marshall Ganz

Exercise for Session Participants

Public Narrative as a strategy to cultivate family and community relationships & partnerships

As you reflect on your context, the leadership role that you hold and the challenges you are facing, please spend some time coming up with ideas for drafting a 3-minute version of your public narrative—a version you would share within your community.

3 Parts	Purpose of each part	Your Ideas. Your Story
SELF	Invites others to be in relationship with you	
US	Invites others join your community	
NOW	Invites others to take action	

Additionally, please choose and complete one of the three questions below for reflection:

Who am I as a cultural being?	
Why is my personal relationship with race, equity, and critical consciousness important as I make system-level decisions?	
What am I hoping to transform in myself, in order to exercise real leadership for critical consciousness and equity?	