

Being a
Story Change Agent
in today's world



THE 10 PRACTICES OF
Story Activism

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Becoming a Story Activist

It's time to take back the power of your story.

A **Story Activist** works with story for positive systemic shift and for focusing collective intelligence on the critical issues of our times. More simply said:

A Story Activist is someone who works with the stories of people, places and things to discover and activate their greatest potential.

These are challenging times. It seems we are at the end of our familiar stories of culture, work, community and life. We are not sure what the future will bring for our families, our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, even our countries. People are moving all over the globe, forced by crises no one could see coming, or many hoped would not happen. There is tension, fear, stories banging up against each other and clashing. So much is going on that it is easy to feel overwhelmed, swamped by the tidal wave of media.. What can anyone do?

The first thing to do is to remember that story is the human operating system. We make sense and meaning of the world through our stories. **We live in a story — and that means we can change it. Each one of us can become a Story Change Agent — a Story Activist.**

A **Story Activist** is, of course, interested in the power of stories — how they are at work in the world, how they influence life and human systems, how they are created and how they change. But more than that,

A Story Activist is engaged in the art and practice of activating stories that lead us to a more flourishing future.

We ask ourselves:

- Where did the stories we live in come from? What gives them power? Are these stories helpful? How do we work together to choose the stories we want to live into?
- Where are our stories keeping us stuck? Where do stories restrict or confine us or keep us from expressing ourselves or changing?
- Where can story help us to move first to common ground, and from there, to higher ground? Where could stories bring us together?
- What stories can help us to create our most flourishing future together? Which stories are generative?
- Which stories do we need to STOP telling? Which stories do we need to KEEP telling? Which stories do we need to START telling?
- Which stories are calling to me/us to activate now? What is mine to do? Who can work with me?
- What is my own storyline and how is it in play now? What can I do to work with my own material so I am clear enough to be helpful?





Here are some suggestions to encourage you to step into practice as a **Story Activist** and begin to activate the stories that will make a difference.

The 10 Story Activism practices described in this book help us to stay alert, awake and focusing on capacity and agency. **Capacity** is important, because being skilful around stories and their impact is just the beginning. Building capacity in yourself and others creates a solid foundation. This solid foundation creates **agency** — the ability to take on challenges and feel like we can make change that has power and influence.

The word "practice" is very consciously chosen. Just as a champion athlete never stops practicing, neither should we. A practitioner is someone who has worked hard to integrate their skills and to achieve mastery, but who stays in curiosity and brings a beginner's mind to everything so the learning never stops.

Why is practice important?

Whatever you practice is what grows in your life: Another word for "practice" is "habit". Whatever you do on a regular basis becomes a habit. Since there are so many competing stories now, it is easy to be overwhelmed or assume you are the mercy of the loudest story being told. Being a **Story Activist** means cultivating a new habit of actively choosing how you live and work with stories.

How do I practice?

Have a look at the overall practice field on the next page. **Tending to yourself and your own stories is the first step.** Working with your own material helps you to be clear when you hear someone else's story. The less triggered you are, the more helpful you can be. Working with your own stories first — and what is beneath and behind them — means you can be present to others. There may also be gifts or strengths hiding in the places where you least expect them. When you are clear about your own story, you can be both more compassionate and less entangled in other people's stories.

Next, when you're with others, you can listen, encourage them to share stories and test where your story might help and support. If there is one skill that is vitally important in this work, it is the ability to listen — to deeply listen and offer your compassionate attention so others feel witnessed and heard. There is so much noise in the world currently. Perhaps most of the shouting and repetition is simply because most people don't feel they have been heard. Maybe by anyone. Your willingness to listen may be the doorway for someone else to show up in a different way.

There may also be stories or challenges that have your name on them — where you are called to take action. **Make spaces to host stories that matter** is the next part of the practice field. Becoming skilful in creating spaces where stories can meet and be shared is so needed in our world today. It is far easier to stay with those you know or be in like-minded groups. That makes it easy to complain about or blame others. We simply don't know their stories. If we did, then we wouldn't fall so easily into "them and us".

And finally, **be part of a storied community.** Find your community of practice. Find others who can be in this inquiry with you. Seek out others you can learn with and from.

This is called "The Fourfold Practice" because it is a holon. Each aspect is a part of the full pattern and whole in itself. Each part takes in the part before and goes further — it enfolds the one before. What you learn from a community of practice you take into refining your personal practice and tending your own story.

The 10 Story Activism practices rest on this basis of personal practice and support you to take action in the world.



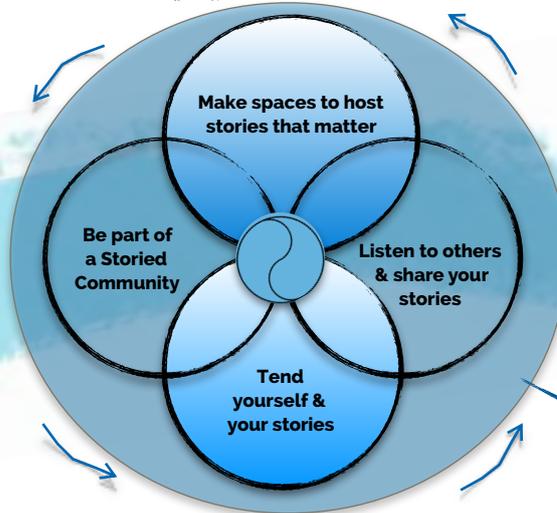


The Fourfold Practice of Story

Make the time and place to host stories that matter. Build capacity to work with emergence, and host diversity, difference and systemic shift.



Be active participants, evokers, co-creators and stewards of generative StoryFields. Be teachers and apprentices of story and Story Activism.



Participate in, help others to be aware of and co-create the unfolding story you are part of. Share your stories where they can be helpful and encourage others to share theirs.

Tending the Story fire

These practices together create a "fireside" where stories can gather to be shared. They make a possibility to meet and co-create more authentically.

Be present with your own story & what lies beyond the story. Work to awaken your own story triggers & gifts so that your story is supporting you to be as clear and present as possible in each moment.

Start here! →

- **Tend to yourself and your own stories.** First, tend to yourself. What do you need to do to help keep yourself grounded, focused and present? How will you support yourself to stay open to learning? What is your personal practice? Next, tend to your stories. What stories are alive in your life and work? What is it that calls for your focus (and what do you do instead?)? What is your practice around engaging the stories that call for your attention? How are you prepared to sift through your own material first?
- **Listen to others & share your stories.** There are so many stories calling for attention in the world and so little listening. That's why most people try talking louder. What can you do to be a more attentive listener? Many of us have been speaking up for a some time. Being a good listener is also an important practice. When you are a good listener, others can be too. Listen first. Then see if there is a story you are holding that might be helpful and share it in a good way.
- **Make spaces to host stories that matter.** Each of us has stories to share, but where can we do that? There are some stories that need safe, thoughtful spaces to be shared. What are the stories that matter and need to be hosted now? Be thoughtful about how you create and hold the space for them to be shared. Sometimes we need to approach our stories with tenderness, sometimes with fierceness. Working with story holds both complexity and emergence. That means patience and curiosity are key attributes. It also important to build the capacity to become a skilful host and help others to do the same.
- **Be part of a storied community.** Each of us comes with our stories – the light and the dark – and together we can become both a community of practice and a community of heart. We can hold it all. Of course rubbing up against each other can cause sparks – and great learning! That's why this step leads immediately back to the first – Tend yourself and your stories. But those sparks can create a central fire we all want to gather around. Being "the many-storied community" is a richer and more creative place to be.

At the heart of the practice is...



Sensei/Warrior

A "sensei" is the master teacher and practitioner in the martial arts dojo. To be a sensei is to be in continual practice, while also maintaining beginner's mind. The warrior knows when to be still and when to make the sword cut cleanly. When to be silent and when to speak up. When to serve the inner practice and when to serve in the world. This is the grandfathering energy.

Steward/Midwife

A "steward" is one who holds open the space for newness to be nurtured and to arrive. To be a steward is to be an inspirer and nurturer of respectful potent space for stories and people to meet and work together. It is to call the highest potential out of self and others. The midwife knows when to be the space creator and holder, and when to take charge and assist the birth of something new. This is the grandmothering energy.

The Pathway of Practice

...is the dance between the Sensei and the Steward; the Warrior and the Midwife.

Based on The Fourfold Practice, Art of Hosting community www.artofhosting.org



PRACTICE 1

Stories are the way we make sense and meaning of the world, determining both our level of agency and the actions we take. Curiosity becomes a medium for transformation when used by a Story Activist. Ask a question, elicit a story, make a move. Keep fostering and deepening your curiosity. It can take you everywhere.

Be More Curious

Stories are **everywhere!** They are hanging out on the street corners, gathering at the coffee machine, stepping between people when they talk together, colouring what you choose to buy and act on, co-opting you when you least expect it.

Our stories are the way we make sense and meaning of the world and they determine what actions we take. You might call them a frame, or a road, or a map, or a lens. How we look at something -- the story we tell about it -- determines our perspective. One of the ways we can help and support each other is to offer different perspectives in the way we use our curiosity.

One of the greatest gifts of humanity is our imagination, and underneath that is something every child is born with -- curiosity. **Curiosity becomes a medium for transformation when it is used by a Story Activist.**

We talk about stereotyping, but in actual fact, we are all **story-o-typers**. We apply our stories to the world and judge it accordingly. And it is easy to get into judgement. Plenty of people around the world are slinging their judgements around and calling it truth. But here's the interesting thing -- judgement and true curiosity cannot exist in the same space.

If we want to use our curiosity wisely, the most potent tool for transformation is a powerful question.



A question is

- a systemic intervention — the moment you ask a question, things begin to change
- a doorway into a new possibility
- a way to give people context so they can find their content --the fastest way to elicit a story
- a way to practice "with-nessing" and witnessing
- a gift to yourself and others
- a way to expand gracious and generous space



We currently have a very low question literacy in the world. What would happen if we set about to change that? In fact, we can, if we work on sharpening our intention, skill and artistry around shaping questions that serve us in life and work.

Practitioners of the World Café point out there are three aspects to creating good questions — the **scope** (is this a question for me, for us, the team, the organisation, the world?), the **construction** (For example, in English WHY is the most powerful question word — it can also be the most confrontational. If I ask “in what ways?”, my brain is alerted to the possibilities of more than one answer, and so on...) and **assumption** (and every question is based on an assumption. If the verb “compete” appears in my sentence, I have assumed that there is a competition. What if it were a “dance” instead?). There is so much to learn about the skill of crafting questions!

Questions are the way to offer context in order to find content. **A powerful question can elicit a potent story.** Here are some of the ways you can play with questions:

- **Harkening back** — “What was your favourite story as a child?” “What does it have to say about the current situation?” “What is your favourite story someone else told you about..?”
- **An appreciative inquiry** — “Tell about time when...” “Tell a story of us at our best...”
- **Taking a different perspective** — “What can we do together that we can’t do alone?” “If you were a... what would you..?”
- **Keeping it open** — “When have you experienced...?” “When have you been the minority in the room? What happened?”
- **A story from a different role or character or attribute** — “When was a time when you experienced the delight of being a grandparent?” “If you spoke from that role...?” “If you told a story from the attribute of courage...?” “If you told a story from the river’s perspective, what would it be?”

Find more resources about working with questions on the Resources page on www.getsoaring.com. And be delighted with this intriguing comic strip take on questions: <http://bit.ly/18qxg5s>.



Remember to

- Be curious about how you approach life. Disrupt your own habits or practice of being asleep as you move through your day. Be so curious that you treat yourself like an anthropology experiment. Allow YOU to surprise yourself. Ask yourself WHY as much as you can - Why do I do it like that? Why do I think that? Why do I react like that? Why am I making this assumption? Really observe yourself.
- Invite yourself to see what you have not been noticing, — to really take in the world and others around you. Be curious about everyone who is NOT you. Ask: “What is it like to be YOU?” Remain curious no matter what faces you.
- Be curious about where a question might serve better than a statement. Asking questions, being curious, help us push the boundaries and extend our inquiry.
- Begin to keep track of the questions posed around you. What kind of questions are they? Are they transactional or transformational? Do they close the door or open the window? Keep polishing your question artistry and practice.
- Keep honing your intention and practice. Where else could you put your questions to work?
- Invite others to craft questions with you. And if you’re planning to use questions in a group — test them first!

I wonder....What is it like to be YOU?



worksheets

Personal & Group Practices

What do you do to return to your own, calm centre? Do you walk, run, swim, meditate, do yoga, pet the dog, play with the kids, sleep well? What is your personal practice? Having a personal practice makes you more resilient, more stable, more able to be curious when things come at you. You are more "grounded", meaning it is less likely that life knocks you over because you have your feet solidly on the ground and you can move with what comes.

What practice would you like to explore or deepen?

If you're working as a team, what practice(s) could you hold together that help you return to your purpose and be clear and cohesive? When are the moments you step away from task and return to purpose? How do you do that? What stories can you share to help each of you understand the others?

Questions to ask yourself

- What is my story about.....? (leadership, work, success, worthiness, relationship, etc.)
- What stories are influencing me? What stories am I carrying from my family? My culture? My place? My extended circle of relationships?
- Where have I fallen into habit in my life? What could I become more curious about? What stories of difference can I explore?
- Where could more curiosity really serve me/us?

Take action

- **Start a story journal.** Write down the stories that come to you from your life. The act of allowing the stories to surface makes more space and curiosity inside you. Are you irritated, for example? Write down the story of irritation. What can you learn from it?
- **Brainstorm story prompts and keep them in a bag, ready for the next team meeting.** Pull out a prompt and ask people to gather in pairs or trios to share brief stories.



Be Good Story Listener

Most often when we think about storytelling, we think about the storyteller and the story they are sharing. And yet no story is told into a vacuum -- if there is a teller, then there also needs to be a listener, whether that "listener" is someone sitting in the same room, or someone reading the story at another time. Listening is one of the fastest ways to learn something and to impact the story being told.

Just as we use stories as our lens on the world, we use them as a listening lens too. Your listening is the most powerful gift you can give others.



PRACTICE 2

Just as we use stories as our lens on the world, we use them as a listening lens too. The art of listening makes you an active co-creator in the telling and will eventually make you a better storyteller and Story Activist, tracking the deeper patterns that lead to transformation.

We compare every story we are hearing to the ones we've heard before. How does this fit into how I see the world? Does this resonate with me? If they don't, we may even not be able to hear them, let alone value them. It is a crucial thing to discover what you are listening for.

Every story is more than just the words that shape it. What is left out is as important as what it left in. A story is what is between, around, behind, underneath the words. Listening can help to shed light on what is on the surface, just like the sun puts objects in stark relief, but it can also illuminate what is hidden, the same as the moon puts a soft glow around things at night.

Storytelling and listening are a powerful combo because of how the brain is wired. When we hear a story that grabs us emotionally or through the senses, then what happens is called entrainment. The story is like a moving train that sweeps us up for the ride. When people feel along with the teller, it is actually happening in real time -- our brains literally light up in the same patterns.



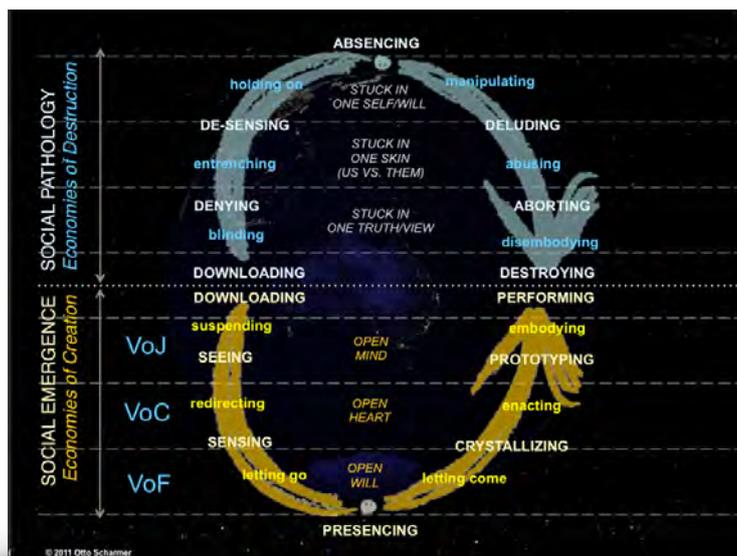
Delve into what listening is for you. "To listen" is different than "to hear" which we can do passively. To listen means we are paying attention to something. To pay attention to something excludes other things. Maybe that's one reason the anagram of LISTEN is SILENT. Other cultures see listening in different ways. Take a look at the Chinese character for listen — Ting. It describes more fully what listening is all about.

All of us have different strengths and styles in listening — what is yours? Who are your listening role models?

Theory U identifies four levels of listening and calls them

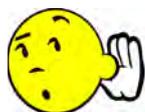
social emergence. The first level is downloading (listening from force of habit to reconfirm old opinions and judgments), then factual (noticing difference, new data). The third level is empathic (seeing through the other person's eyes) and at the bottom of the U is generative (listening from the future wanting to emerge). Of course there is also social pathology, when listening takes us from downloading in denying through absencing through to destroying. Notice the similarity between the word destroy and de-story.

Adding the practice of listening gives us more depth on the **Fourfold Practice of Story**. In the first practice of **Tend to Yourself & Your Stories**, there is an added emphasis on practicing with-ness, first with yourself. Do your own inner story work, create structures for self-hosting and surrender, meaning: open yourself to be present. And in the second practice of **Listen to Others & Share Your Stories**, there comes an emphasis on emotional resilience — making a bigger now with your presence, going back to your personal practice when listening gets hard, and finding the ground to stay in the not-knowing as a story is surfacing or unfolding.



From: Otto Scharmer & The Presencing Institute

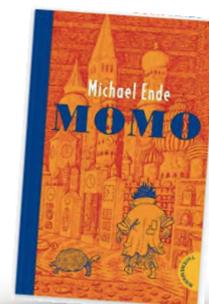
Personal Practice



Practicing listening makes you a companion in the telling and will eventually make you a better storyteller. Begin by waking up your inner ears first with silence and then with sounds. Here's a soundscape of piano music in the Arctic as a first offering. What does it evoke in you?. See the video here: <http://bit.ly/28ljVOo>:

You can practice various aspects of listening simply by putting attention into the way you listen to others around you.

- **Can you listen with attention?** Start by listening purely to what captured your attention. Why did it capture your attention? Did you stay with the story until the end or go off in your own mind? If your mind wandered off, where did it go? Keep calling it back to listening.
- **Next, try paying attention to how what you're hearing is impacting you.** What are the feelings in your body? What colour, shape or texture do these feelings have? What are they reflecting to you? Where do you become emotionally engaged (and how) in what others are saying? Where do you feel yourself triggered? Why? What emotions are stuck? What do you need to do to unravel a tangle of emotions so that you can be a clear listener?
- **Try listening to the content of what someone else is saying.** What question can you offer that will take the speaker or storyteller into more depth or into reflection about what they are offering?
- **Listen to the context within which a story appears.** What can you learn about WHY someone is telling this story or WHY they might feel the way they do? You might want to listen attentively and then test your findings by offering back a metaphor to the speaker..



Choosing different aspects to listen for makes you more and more aware of the rich tapestry that is available in any story and builds your capacity to explore and offer back.

Chapter 2 is all about listening!



W O R K S H E E T

Personal & Group Practices

How good a listener are you? Set yourself some good listening practice to find out. In the next meeting, commit to giving your full attention to the speaker. Make a mark on a piece of paper every time your mind wanders off. Bring it back to focus. See if you can listen with curiosity, even appreciation, valuing the other as a fellow human.. Notice what that does to your experience.

What are you listening for? Most of us listen to find out when we can speak, rather than listening for understanding. Check your purpose for listening and demonstrate your understanding to the speaker. "You meant....?" Asking good questions of a speaker also demonstrates the quality of your listening.

What stories are you hearing? Much of our conversation is transactional, but there are stories everywhere! Tune your ears and see if you can find the stories in the conversations you are part of. What kind of stories are popping up around you? Are they positive? Negative? Past or future oriented? Do they describe problems or possibilities? Becoming awake to what surrounds you is the first step.

If you're working in a team, listen carefully to the stories the team regularly shares. Are they stories of pitfalls or blame or are they stories of what's going well and where it might go in the future? Listening to your co-workers lets you know whether you are in a generative field where people feel they have agency or not. You'll also become aware of the material you have to work with — either to move away from, or to use as a foundation to create an even brighter future.

Questions to ask yourself

- What am I using my listening for? What am I habitually listening to?
- Where do I need to be silent and practice more listening?
- Where do I need to listen more to myself?
- What is my deep listening telling me about where change and leverage points exist in the stories around me?



PRACTICE 3

Our stories can hold us down or they can lift us up. Stories of connection and contribution help to create a resonant field of change. What stories do we need to STOP telling? Which do we need to KEEP telling? What stories do we need to START telling?

Start Telling Stories That Will Help Us Live Well Together

We live in the multiverse of story. Stories are literally coming at us in every moment. Each person, place and thing is not one story, but the intersection of stories — a StoryField. The stories we hold about ourselves, the stories that come from our culture and location, all have an impact. Sometimes a story that is not even ours -- for example the story "dogs are dangerous" -- can make a big impact. That makes becoming aware and skilful about how stories work and how to use them important.

Stories are the tuning fork of humanity -- every story has its own resonance, it is a resonance tuner.



Stories of fear have a low resonance -- it is hard to create something new and positive from that heaviness. Stories of connection and contribution can help to create the resonant field of change. You can work with stories to change the resonance you work and live in.

What stories are surrounding you now? What stories do we need to STOP telling -- because they are no longer useful, or true, or helpful? What stories do we need to KEEP telling -- because they reinforce connection, understanding or new perspectives? What stories do we need to START telling -- because they point to something new we want to foster, engender or cultivate?

Data cannot defeat a prevailing story -- but another story can! Does it have to be a true story? **No!** As long as it is resonant for the audience, true for you and you can befriend it, then any kind of story can do. Christina Baldwin's talks about this in her excellent book "StoryCatcher".

Comb through your own life first. Where do you want to place your focus?

What stories can help us to live well together?



Six Steps of The Tao of Story

Learning how stories work — and how to work with them — takes practice. A good place to start is with your local storytelling group or reading one of the many books available on storytelling. There is a great list of books on the Resources page on the SOAR website.



6 simple steps to master the power of STORY in work & life

Here are the **Six Steps of the Tao of Story**.

FIND is the first step -- be clear about the stories you are looking for and what your intention with these stories is. Ask people you know for guidance about where to find stories you don't know about — even in your own life!

Then **HARVEST** your material -- comb through what you've gathered and see what you can make of it. What unexpected themes can you find in your body of experience? Are certain situations or characters repeating?

Next comes **CRAFT** — working with the material you have to shape it for the audience you want to work with -- this is the time of polishing and asking for feedback until you are pleased with the story you've shaped.

ENGAGE is the step where you work with your own inner environment -- often the inner critic -- to prepare yourself for telling your story. How do you want to engage your audience with this story? Do you want them to be in conversation after it? Do you want to gather the stories it sparks in them? This is about setting the scene and the process for the story to do its work.

Once the story is shared, it can't help but **EVOLVE**, so where would you like the story to go from here? How will you continue to work with it as it works with the listeners? What is the future story?

And finally, **BE**. How will you live the storyteller's life? How will you stay awake to the stories and StoryFields that want to shape you? How can story operate as the currency for the organisations and systems you are part of? How will you continue to learn and polish your story skills?

As you work more with stories, began to gather them so you can have a set of stories in your back pocket — like a resource that can be used in any moment. You can gather real life experiences, teaching stories, fables, myths, fairy tales and other stories that can help to shine a light on new perspectives or ways of being and use them at the appropriate moment. Working on your own collection of stories makes you both resourceful and able to reinforce your point in a way that works directly with your listeners.



Find out more about how to work with stories check out the SOAR website: www.getsoaring.com



worksheets

Personal & Group Practices

Reflect on and comb through your own stories. How do the stories you carry frame the way you see the world around you and what agency you think you have? It may be you have inherited some stories that really don't fit you anymore. Time to lay them to rest! It could be you find there are some stories you want to live into. Go after them!

The stories we tell pattern the space. That means they create a pattern that we begin to live in, just like putting on a pair of glasses with orange lenses makes the world look quite different than other coloured lenses. Stories are a lens. You might say they are a roadway. Some stories beckon us to the top of the mountain and some are baggage.



In organisational systems, stories are like yogurt. They are alive and being fed by the culture. A bunch of negative stories floating around? They are being fed by negativity. A great morale and energy in the place? It is being fed by stories of promise and possibility. Of course you can just leave the yogurt in the fridge and hope for the best... or you can intentionally feed it so you are surrounded by stories that help you and your colleagues to be stronger together in pursuit of your goals.

Questions to ask yourself

- What are the stories I/we regularly tell? How are they patterning the space?
- What stories do we need instead? Or what stories need to be reinforced?
- Where can I find stories that demonstrate where I want to go/ who I want to be?

Take action

- **Take a week and practice saying NO to negative stories.** Move away from the complaining conversation and tell a story of possibility or promise. In your next meeting, tell a story that exemplifies where you want to go, rather than what you want to avoid.
- **Begin to actively search out the kind of stories you want to propagate** — pretend you are a Story Gardener planting seeds. Once you start looking, even the act of looking will mean you see more.



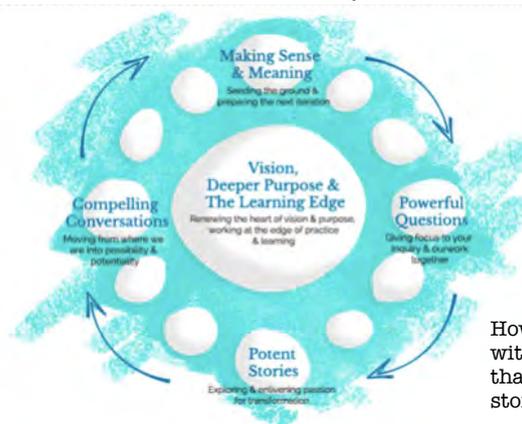
Build Your Capacity To Create Spaces For Stories To Be Shared.....

Stories are everywhere! Looking at the field of story, we find all types --- myths, legends and founding stories; stories telling us why things are the way they are, fairy tales, family stories like "the one that got away" (commonly known as fish stories), anecdotes people share at work and the narratives we weave through conversation -- are connected. They are all an important part of what it means to be human and how we make sense and meaning of the world.

From a process sense, **powerful questions** are the doorway to stories -- context leads to content -- and potent stories in turn give us more compelling conversations. Our stories can help us to bring up what really matters. In conversation together, we create common ground and that leads to collective sense and meaning making. At the centre is vision, deeper purpose and the learning edge, taking us to the next iteration of the system.

PRACTICE 4

Stories are like people — they need to be invited. Hone the capacity for hosting generous space -- spaces and places that create a container for stories to be heard, shared, welcomed and worked with. Change your stance from hero to host to bring more voices together.



How SOAR works with the elements that support stories

Of course, we all love "big S" stories -- stories that are powerful emotionally and even physically. These stories move us to take action — either outwardly or inwardly. But "small s" stories -- the way you deal with life, the ordinary stories -- are just as important. Your "small s" story might be the one that creates a bridge of understanding or even saves someone else's life.

In order to create spaces where stories can be shared, **context**, **deep listening** and **witnessing** are needed. These are the three legs of the stool and together they equal the field of invitation. They begin to build a container that is strong enough to hold StoryWork. A good metaphor for this is drinking tea -- you can drink tea out of a saucer, a cup or out of a teapot, but if you are carrying tea and you trip, the teapot is the container best suited for keeping the tea together -- it is the container that is most robust and can best deal with turbulence. In the same way, **good process** is an important container for people working together -- especially if their views are very different. **Choose your process wisely.**

Participatory Process

Participatory process offers the environment for people to share stories and come into conversation. It invites people to participate. This might happen through working with a partner, or sharing stories in a trio. Maybe people have the opportunity to work in small groups afterwards to share what they learned or what changed their perspective.

This kind of process is intended to create a generous space — a space where people feel listened to and able to listen.



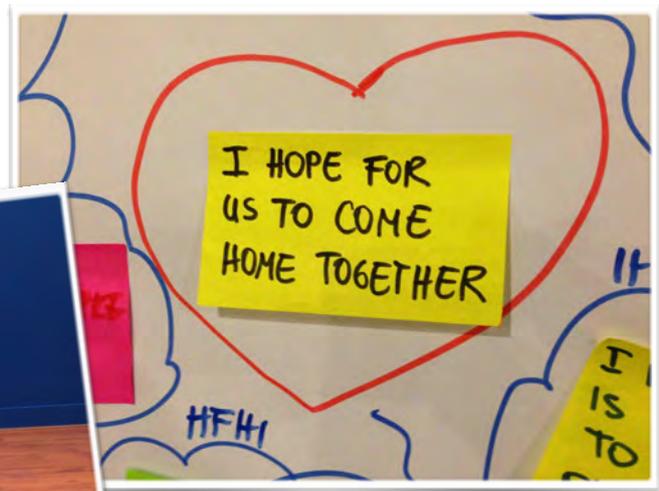
This way of working requires you to change your stance from hero to **host**. Of course you can host from the front, but you can also host from the chair, the back, the side or the centre (as Robert Greenleaf so eloquently put it in talking about his concept of "servant leadership"). The key is becoming skillful at holding the space as people step in to get to know each other and reveal something about themselves. Or while they grapple with the tension that comes from not knowing the answer to a challenging problem and having to stumble while finding it. All of this is quite natural, but we are trained to want to find the right answer. And hopefully as quickly as possible! We don't want to fail, we don't want to be uncomfortable and we are frightened to show too much of ourselves to someone we don't know.

And yet storytelling offers us the opportunity to see into each other, to get to know each other, to "try on" the reality of someone else by stepping into their shoes for a moment. Story is a vehicle for us to travel as the other and experience what they experience.

As a Story Activist, one of the most important actions you can take is to hone the capacity for hosting generous space -- spaces and places that create a container for stories to be heard, shared, welcomed and worked with. Here are some questions to ask yourself to get started:

- What stories do I want to work with?
- How can I approach these stories?
- Who do I want to work with?
- Where are the places/spaces to do this work?
- How can I prepare myself?
- Who can partner me? Who are my mentors and teachers?
- Where can I hone my practice? How can I stay in practice?
- Who will stay in practice with me?

A good place to look for support with your practice is through the Art of Hosting community (www.artofhosting.org)





W O R K S H E E T

Personal & Group Practices

Sharing stories requires trust. You can begin to build trust in that way you start and end meetings. Instead of just starting into the business at hand, begin with framing the purpose of the meeting and offer a question or a prompt to check in with. A check in simply means that each voice is heard in turn so everyone is invited to be present. How many times have you noticed that someone's body arrived in a meeting but their brain was obviously left two meetings back and takes a long time to catch up? A check in helps to bring more of a person into the room so the group can really start together. You could ask:

- Why did you say yes to the invitation to be here?
- Share one thing about our team that you've really been valuing recently.
- What's at the top of your "this matters" list and why?
- What do you most hope to get from our meeting?
- Tell the story of how you came to be in this circle.

Similarly, at the end of the meeting, wrap up with a check out. Instead of a ragged finish, where people drop off the conversation, make a completion by hearing everyone briefly again:

- What are you taking away from this meeting?
- What is your next step or action item?
- What did you appreciate about our time together?

These little pieces of process help everyone to feel that there is more solid ground for the work the group wants to do together.

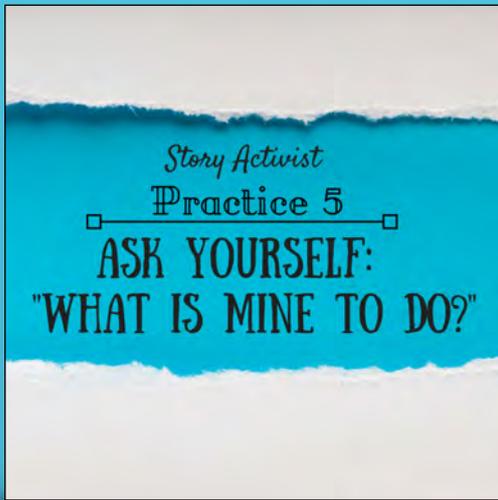
Context leads to content. Every person is full of stories — but sometimes they don't know where to find them. Asking a focused question is a good way to help someone to find their story.

Questions to ask yourself

- What questions could I ask that open the door to more stories?
- How can I invite more stories — and therefore more experience into my next meeting?
- Who could I partner with to explore more how process and stories can work together?

Take action

- Find out where you can get some training in group process. Art of Hosting (www.artofhosting.org) is a great place to start.



PRACTICE 5

Listen deeply to your own unfolding story. What is it that really calls you into action now? Ask yourself: "How does my story need to grow and change? What is mine to do? What are my next elegant steps?". Take time to deeply sense into your piece of the puzzle. Illuminate what you need to let go of and the responsibilities, challenges and gifts to be taken up now. Be in fierce practice.

Ask Yourself: "What is mine to do?"

With **Practice 1** we started with the quietest, and yet -- in these troubled times -- most challenging practice: **Be more curious.** Where there is true curiosity judgement finds it challenging to come in. The pathway to curiosity comes through personal practice. What do YOU do to keep yourself grounded, clear, able to act instead of react?

Next came **Practice 2: Be a good story listener.** We find out that listening can be harder than it looks if you want to listen to understand, witness and host stories into being. And especially if you are listening to something uncomfortable or challenging! Being a good listener is the first step in being a good teller and the foundation for Story Activism.

Practice 3 encouraged us to **Start telling stories that will help us live well together.** We realise here that stories are like tuning forks -- they each have their own resonance. Part of being a Story Activist is to attune to the field and see what is needed to raise the resonance so people can meet each other and lean in together.

Practice 4 focused on **Build your capacity to create spaces for stories to be shared.** What are the simple, but potent processes that can build a container for stories to be shared and people to meet? And now, with **Practice 5 Ask yourself: "What is mine to do?"**, we focus on where our own stories are going from here and what stories are calling for our attention. In essence we have worked from the outside in.

The world is not asking for more specialists at this moment, the world is asking for people who are **alive.** So we ask ourselves: "How do I surrender to the gracious invitation that Life is always extending? How does MY story need to grow and change? What is mine to do? What are my next elegant steps?".

One way we can see a pathway is to learn through the stories that inhabit our own psyches. Having a look at our gifts and challenges in this life and where we are on the crossroads is a good place to start. Our stories can help



illuminate the things we no longer need to carry and the responsibilities and gifts that need to be picked up now.

Although there are thousands or millions of challenges that need attending to, no one of us can handle them all. If you do, you can tire yourself out, feel like you are the servant to something you never chose, go crazy or burn yourself out. Instead of doing more, for a moment, **do less**. Ask yourself truthfully: **"What is mine to do?"**.

Humanity has always looked for assistance at reaching our intuitive wisdom. We've consulted the stones, the bones, the trees, the stars, the animals, crystals and of course, we've made the pilgrimage to oracular sites to have our questions answered. One of the most famous oracles was located at Delphi in ancient Greece. Over the door to the oracle's sanctuary were carved the words "Know Thyself", still a profound pathway to inner wisdom.



The Oracle from "The Matrix"

In the old fairytales, the hero or heroine arrived at the crossroad and often there was a mysterious figure standing there. This figure sometimes supported and often challenged the traveller. If the test was achieved, the traveller received the gift of something magical or even ordinary, which later proved to be of great value.

Your personal tale

Creating your own story can help you find a new pathway firmly founded on your own inner wisdom. Writing in the third person helps you to have enough distance from your own material to see something new.

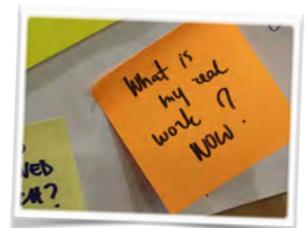
Create your personal fairy tale using these prompts. Write it in the third person.

- Once upon a time there was...
- S/he was given the gifts of...
- And also...
- But then...
- And finally s/he found themselves at the crossroads called _____.
- Standing at the crossroads was _____ who told him/her that _____ must be given away and _____ must now be picked up, and gave her/him a parchment that read: _____.

If you have resistance to this assignment, facing it will help you learn something from this tension. After all, if you are going to hatch a bird, an egg has to break. You can't birth something without a challenge of seeing it through. You will see something and learn something for yourself, even if no one else sees it.

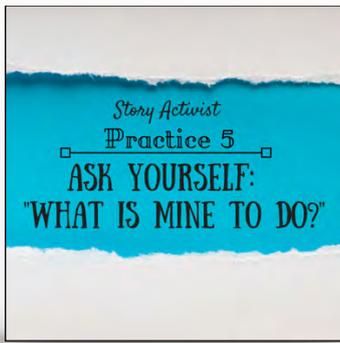
However if you have someone you can trust, you might want to share your tale with them and ask for some feedback. See if they can respectfully help you to find your calling and pick up your own inner wisdom.

- What is the crossroads you are standing at now?
- What gifts were you given?
- What has happened to challenge you? What are the gifts in the wounds you carry?
- Who (or what) is standing at the crossroads?
- What does your story invite you to leave behind? To pick up or focus on now?
- What surprised you about any of this? What touched you or brought up emotion?
- What inspiration are you taking from this story?



What are my next elegant steps?

What will you do now?



Worksheet

Personal & Group Practices

In the rush of the everyday, when — and where — do you take time for yourself so that you can focus inward? Intuition is that still, small voice within, the one that often gets lost in the noise of the outside world. It is very tempting to fall into social media or the spin of the latest news. There is so much that needs attending to. And when we see someone who is capable, we often turn to them and say: "Here, **you** do it!".

That makes listening to yourself vitally important. What does YOUR heart say? What is your call? Scientists say that we actually have three brains — a physical one in the head, as well as intelligence located in the heart and the gut. No wonder people follow their gut instinct — it is actually their own intelligence speaking.

Some people are acting out of the stories of their relatives or their culture or tribe. They don't stop to take time to really sense into their own feelings. **What is it that you truly feel called to do?**

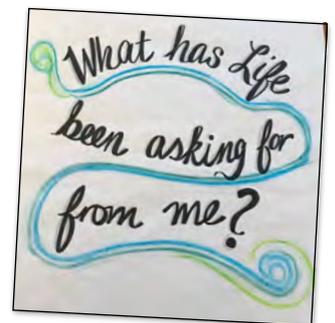
Sometimes having a calling means you can feel really alone.

You have to sit in an empty circle of chairs until someone else shows up. Are you prepared for that? Is your commitment firm because THIS story REALLY matters? Do you have what it takes to stay in the game?

This is letting **purpose** be the invisible leader at the centre of the circle. So you see — you weren't alone at all!

Questions to ask yourself

- What really calls to me? Where do I feel most alive? Where am I mad? (Sometimes anger can be the fire we need to get started) What breaks my heart open?
- What are the big things and what are the small things that really matter to me?
- Where do I want to use my skills and talents? (After all, you are trading your life essence for the money you receive from work. Is it worth it?)



Take action

- **...by doing nothing for a moment.** Allow yourself to BE for a moment and really focus into your life. Whose story are you living in? If it's not yours — or it's a past version of you still running the show, — what really calls to you now? Can you name this new story?

Find Your Team. Lean In. Stay Connected.



PRACTICE 6

It takes a field to shift a field. Find your team -- who are the people who will be the strong core? Set your principles and ways of working so you can lean in and stay together through the challenges which are part of any worthwhile endeavour.

Once you've found your focus, then what?

The first thing to ask yourself is: "Who's with me?" Having a team around you is more important than just having enough people to look like a crowd or a fan base. It is a matter of quantum physics — if you want to shift a field, you need to be a field. Having a strength of numbers — even if it's only one other person — means more energy, more synergy, more collective intelligence. is available. Your combined energy is the beginning of an attractor field.that can change a story.

Since the early 70's when George Lucas discovered Joseph Campbell and his work "The Hero with a Thousand Faces", his movie **Star Wars** opened the door to a massive focus on the hero's journey pattern.

Thousands of books and movies have been based on this pattern — and often the focus falls on a key character with a few — or many sidekicks. What we tend to overlook is that big work can never been done by one person alone. While one person can shift a boulder, it's going to take a team to move the mountain.

Find your team. Lean in.

When you hear the words "great team", what do you think of? Some people will immediately think of their favourite sports teams. Others might think of great performers in music or the arts. And yet others will think of volunteer groups behind the scenes working with natural disasters or saving lives. These teams have four things in common:

They focused on being a team first.

It is very easy to get so excited about the potential of the future that you forget to build the foundation for today. Many groups rush into the task they have in mind and focus on the doing. Sooner or later, they hit turbulence and suddenly find that there's not enough glue in the team to stay together. They forgot to focus on who they were being first.



The glue in any team is **relationship**.

And it takes twice as much relationship to turbulence in order to weather the storm and stay together. Great teams work on building trust and creating shared principles to fall back on when times get tough.

They honed the art of blending their strengths and skills together.

Some of the best teams are less like the military and more like an expedition. In the military model there is a clear chain of command and you follow the directives of the leader. In a good expedition, though, people are chosen because they are all uniquely capable and with a new situation, someone else might take the leadership because they are ideally suited for it in that moment. This cannot happen with a rigid hierarchy in place. At the same time, military or sports teams provide a good learning model — they drill for long enough that doing the right thing becomes second nature and everyone can rely on the others to know what to do when the time comes.

It has often been said that the Beatles cut their teeth on more than 10,000 hours of playing together in Hamburg before they were discovered. Those hours and hours of gigging meant that they knew exactly how to blend their talents into a unique sound that took them around the world. Perhaps your team practice has to do with listening, or managing conflict, or calming down in the face of challenge or aggression. The more you practice and embody your practice, the more focused you can stay. That way, no one gets your off your game and into theirs!



They defined what they mean by "team" and by "leadership".

From my perspective a new paradigm leader is someone who creates the places for stories to meet and be shared, who holds the space open for a bigger question, and who is quite intentional about the stories she or he chooses to activate and support. Many organisations are now experimenting with being "leaderful" instead of focusing on individual leaders.

It is also important to experiment with creating a team that has enough diversity in it. Back in the 1970s psychologist Dr Meredith Belbin wrote about the near failures of the early Apollo space missions. Their teams were made up of highly intelligent people. In fact, too intelligent. They didn't have enough diversity and therefore missed important elements that would have strengthened the missions. He identified a set of team roles that were important for the success of any team. What's your ideal balance of hearts and smarts?

They use stories to keep building momentum.

Great teams also keep telling themselves the story of their best possible future — they keep moving towards it even when the going seems tough. They use stories to reinforce their values and principles, to support each other in taking the next small steps. And they find and share stories from outside their circle that can help them learn and stay motivated.

Stories are the currency of any group — from families through organisations and all the way to countries and regions. Are you using them intentionally to help support change?

Stay connected

It takes work to stay connected as you move forward together. Take regular times to check in, see how it's going, share learning and laugh together. Commit to being honest. Learn how to ask for help and receive it. Say THANK YOU. This is your best insurance policy against losing energy and focus, and your strongest foundation for success.

Most importantly, the more connected you are to yourself, the more connected you can be to each other. Staying true to yourself means you can bring more of yourself into your passion and into your focus. And when you can bring your vulnerability — your doubts, concerns and questions — as well as your brilliance, magic can happen.





worksheets

Personal & Group Practices

Get clear about your core focus. It's important to keep your focus and your purpose clearly in the centre, so it can act as the invisible leader. A good way to do this is to formulate a calling question. A question can act both as a doorway and as an ongoing call to inquiry and action. It gives you something to keep coming back to — and new ways to look at what you want to achieve.

Many years ago I worked with a bright 21 year old who wanted to put on a series of events where young people's voices would be heard about the future of the country. After working on it for some time, our calling question became: **What if New Zealand were a place where young people are an irresistible force for positive change?**

There are so many things to inquire into with this question — What does place mean? Who are the young people we're focusing on? What are different culture ideas around "young people"? In what ways are young people magnetic? What positive change might be possible? What would happen if society saw young people like that? What if they saw themselves like that?

A powerful question can keep working with you (and on you!) as you begin to look for aspects of the overall story to change.

Agree on your principles. Most of us operate with a strong set of values, but we don't usually talk about them. We may agree on "respect" as a key value, but if we don't know what that looks like, then we may well come into conflict anyway, because most conflict comes from transgressing values. Another way of talking about principles is to call them guidelines or "ways of working" (did you notice that spells WOW?). What minimal guidelines does the team need to stay respectful and in connection with each other when conflict arises? If you have an agreement here, it can save relationship later on because you can call each other on your agreements.

Set a team rhythm. Working with stories is emergent work — you can't tell what might come up or what it might set off. So staying connected, clear, and in good relationship is important. When will you come together to share what's happened? When will you clear the air? Do you want to appreciate each other or share learning? What's your team rhythm to keep your story alive and changing?





Take Courage. Focus On What Matters & Begin Anywhere.....

Take courage

What does courage mean to you?

So many people mistake heroism for courage. They think that being courageous demands an heroic act — saving someone from burning building or rescuing a child from a swollen river. We all love stories of courage and heroism in the face of great odds. But let's take a closer look at the word **courage**.

It's root is the French word "couer" meaning "heart". To have courage, first you must have the heart for it. The "rage" of the heart is the passion of the heart. And it indeed takes courage to follow the call of your heart — no matter how simple that may seem.



So we're not talking about the big acts of heroism here, **we're talking about acts of everyday courage**. The courage to speak up for yourself or someone else The courage to admit you don't know the answer. The courage to say no to a story that is no longer generative or to create a new story for yourself. and live it.



It certainly takes courage to stand up for a new story if you're in the midst of an old one exerting a lot of power. It also takes courage to take on a story even if you don't know where to begin or how you might work with it.

That's why it is important to be part of a team, even if it's a small one, and to stick together.

When the story of Denmark going bankrupt in 1813 grabbed my attention, I had no idea where to start. But I knew it was important. At the time I first heard the story, may countries were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy — Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal. Yet here was a story of country that went bankrupt and the following year instituted universal schooling, — focusing on the importance of citizen education and creating an educational form that exists to this day — and produced the Golden Age 50 years later.

No one had studied this point in history because everyone

PRACTICE 7

You have the resources you need, now find the ways to take up and strengthen your courage. Keep purpose at the centre. Start wherever there is energy. Keeping your focus will tell you where to move next.

focused on the Golden Age instead.. But I had a strong feeling that we could we learn from this time of challenge and crisis. The story inspired me: What if we treated crises as opportunities instead? What if they were a jumping off point instead of an iceberg that sinks the Titanic? I was determined to find out.

I didn't live in Denmark at the time and I didn't speak Danish. Still, I called on a circle of Danish friends and committed to putting my stake in the ground. They were intrigued enough — some might say crazy enough! — to join me. Together, we had enough courage to take a step into the unknown.



Focus on what matters & begin anywhere

We've said before that working with stories is an emergent journey. But what does that really mean?

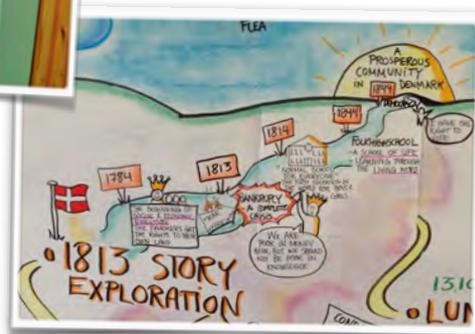
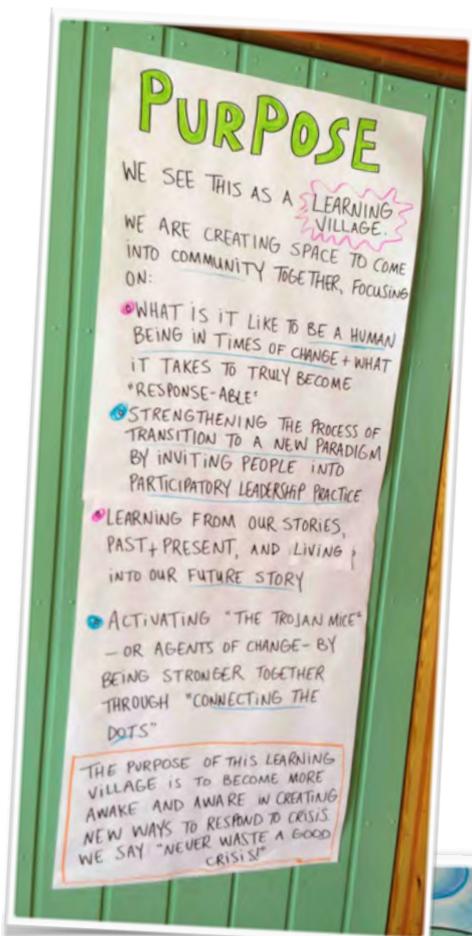
A good analogy is driving at night. When you decide to drive somewhere at night, you already have a sense of the destination you have in mind. You get into the car and you turn on the headlights. That means you can see at a maximum 350 feet ahead of you. Still, you begin the journey, aware that you'll respond to whatever comes up. A bridge might be out, there might be a detour. Someone gets hungry. We realise we're about to drive past a friend's place and decide to make a visit. We decide to share the driving, so no one gets too tired and we can stay on the journey.

Since we don't know exactly how the journey will turn out, the most important thing to do is to stay awake, alert, and together as it unfolds. **So stay focused on the possibility and start anywhere.**

Working with the Denmark 1813 story, we started out by exploring the story and its aspects. We created multiple gatherings where we looked at parts of the story and worked with what we found. We engaged people with conversation and art. We celebrated 200 years since the crisis in 2013. We published what we found out and one of our team even created a program for public radio which is still being repeated today.

We even offered an alternative Constitution Day (5 June in Denmark) experience at a Folk High School for a group of local citizens. We told the story of 1813 and invited them into a World Café conversation about the state of the state. Many were intrigued and stimulated at the depth of citizen conversation. We didn't start with a professional strategy in this project, we simply kept following the thread as it emerged.

Today, the story of 1813 is still influencing politics as the major alternative party in Denmark carries the thread of citizen conversation forward in its policies.



For the full story of our work with the Denmark 1813 story, take a look in the Portfolio section of the SOAR website.



worksheets

Personal & Group Practices

Every story has the potential of a diamond. Think about it — a diamond is a gemstone cut with multiple facets — that's what makes it shine. Every story has both seen and unseen facets too. Take a moment to brainstorm all the facets of the story you want to work with.

Say it's time to work on the story around your community. Think about:

- What is the founding story?
- How has this place changed over time?
- What history has unfolded here?
- What is the power of place at work here?
- What are the dominant narratives at play here? Who tells them?
- What are other narratives that exist here? Who tells those?
- Who are all the characters in this story? How do those characters see the story? How do they interact?
- If we keep going like this, what will the future story be? What are some alternative endings?
- What's one thing that can be changed which will dramatically alter the current future storyline?

What is at the heart of what you want to do? Take a good amount of time to sit together and focus into the heart of the story change you want to make. If you formulated it as a question, what would it sound like? Having a powerful calling question gives you something to keep your focus on. And it helps people know where to keep their focus — on the question, not on you as the leader. What is the most simple, elegant first step you can make together from this question?

Take action

- **Take a fresh look at the stories around you** — Create a row of seats with labels for different perspectives. One might be called "12 year old", another might be "recent immigrant", another "business owner", "living in X neighbourhood", and so on. Take turns sitting in these seats and speak the story from their perspective. See what you can learn about the story.
- **Take the improv challenge** — One of the rules of improv comedy is to keep the story flowing by saying yes to every offer. Give it a try. Someone suggest something — see if you can come back with "Yes, and...!" instead of "Yes, but...!" There will be so much more energy if you do. Kick the "but...".
- **Make an act of courage.**— Build your energy as a team. What's one small step outside the comfort zone? For some people, it is receiving appreciation. For others it is asking for help. And for some, telling a personal story. Brainstorm a list — and make the step!





PRACTICE 8

How many times have policies been set where those impacted were not part of the decision? Having all stakeholder voices in the room ensures the knowledge of the full system can be at play and people are committed to make change happen.

If It's About Them, Don't Do It Without Them

How many times have you been part of a meeting about some important topic, only to find the "usual suspects" present? Perhaps the topic is elder care, but there are no older people in the group talking about policy. Or a team has assembled to focus on the needs of children, but no children are present and no one sought their voice.

Or the topic is about nature, but only the users are present, no one speaks on behalf of nature. Or we want to talk about diversity and only one part of the community is in the room.

The important question here is not "How do we get more information?" but:

How do we get everyone who is part of the issue into the room together to work on finding answers everyone can be committed to?



Often the hurdle to overcome is one of relationship. Most people enter into a committed action because they have a relationship that gets them into the room or to the meeting in the first place. They come because of trust. Or because of connection or respect or status. Sometimes they come simply because they were **asked**.

The Art of Invitation

Invitation is an art form. The Art of Invitation is what helps people to feel there is space for their contribution and it has many other benefits as well. Clear invitations

- make the boundaries of a conversation transparent
- stimulate deeper thinking about an issue or a challenge or offer a different perspective on something
- create a clarity around agenda, process and how the experience will unfold



- make it clear who has been invited and why
- help participants arrive ready to work on the matter at hand

When you create a field of invitation, there's simply more "YES!" to go around. I've learned over time that people don't just want to participate, they want to contribute. They want to put their love and attention into something that matters. So make a big list of what needs to be done and find a way to invite everyone you meet into it. Make the working together fun and engaging, even if the work itself is challenging.

We need everyone

After World War 1, the idea of optimising everything was in vogue. Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy wrote a book of short stories called "Everything is Different". In one of the stories, he posited that the world was shrinking as humans became better connected, laying the first ground for social networking theory and the notion of "six degrees of separation" — the idea that any two people are separated by a maximum of five relationships.

These days, such a notion doesn't sound strange at all! Social media makes it easy to hear different voices and scroll through lots of different input. It gives us the illusion we're all connected, but in fact, we are hearing more soundbites and surface opinions than we are sharing stories. It can feel far tougher to move outside your circle of acquaintances and begin working with new people, face to face.

So how do you find new people? Just beginning to ask others: "Who else do you know...?" is one place to start. So is asking questions so you can hear their story first. Going to where your new people hang out is also a good strategy. The Appreciative Inquiry community has some good stories about this.

In the early 1980s Bliss Browne wanted to work with youth at risk. She wondered how to change their stories about their own futures. Out of this question grew the initiative "Imagine Chicago". It paired youth at risk as interviewers talking to Chicago's best and brightest about their views of how a positive future could unfold for the city. And something interesting happened.

City leaders were intrigued and stimulated to be in conversation with young people. They shared new ideas, powerful stories and personal insights in a way they never would have, had this simply been the traditional business interview. The young people gained a view of their community they would not have seen if they stayed with their own perspective of life, they got coaching and support — and in more than one instance, the resources to catapult them into a new reality. One interviewee was so impressed by the young person who came to see her, that she financed his university education.

So what are the innovative ways you can put together people who haven't worked together before? Appreciative Inquiry calls this "the power of the improbable pair", meaning that those people who believe they are most different to each other might discover something astonishing together when they realise they are more alike than they think.

Do what you can to break the boundaries and think about what might make people new to your circle most comfortable. One way to do that might be to ask them to bring a friend. It's really challenging — and possibly even very annoying — to be the only representative of something in a larger group of people. Think carefully about the place you meet in and the way you meet. Each of these sets the scene.

And last, not least — speak from the heart about why you need them. A heartfelt invitation can make all the difference!





W O R K S H E E T

Personal & Group Practices

Who are all the people impacted by the story you want to work with? Name all the stakeholders, all the characters in the story. How are they represented in your work? Say for example, you want to work with the story of a school. How are the kids part of the conversation about the future of the school? Perhaps you've asked them for drawings or stories about learning if they are very young. Perhaps you've asked them to be part of the conversation if they are over a certain age. Perhaps they are even part of the hosting team.

Maybe you've asked the kids to interview their parents and grandparents about their top learning experiences and you've decided to work with those stories to find a new story for the future. Remember, the more you involve people, the more they will be part of creating their own potential future.

Make sure you mix it up a bit! If you have a group coming together to share stories, make it more interesting by asking each person to choose as their partner the person they think is most different to them. Remind them they don't have to tell their partner why they chose them, just leave them in mystery!

Questions to ask yourself

- What question could you ask that would uncover a totally new perspective on the situation you'd like to work with?
- What stories are influencing the current situation? Who is telling them? How can you invite them?
- How can you walk a mile in someone else's shoes? What would you learn if you did?

Take action

- Extend your network through "each one, reach one." Ask each person your group to think of people who represent communities who are yet to be in the room and invite them to the next meeting.
- Choose new and different places for your meeting. Issue an open invitation and see who shows up.



PRACTICE 9

Be the patient gardener. Plant the small seeds and tend them well. At the same time, keep the vision of the beautiful forest in your mind's eye. Big things start from small beginnings and small things tended with big heart can work wonders.

Focus On The Possible, Dream The Impossible.

Every day, Jadav Payeng takes one action that brings his dream a little closer — he plants a tree. That might not sound like a lot, but over the past 37 years that daily action has created a forest out of a barren sandbar. The forest Jadav has planted in northern India is now larger than Central Park in New York City and is home to rhinos, Bengal tigers and even a herd of elephant.



The life that now teems in this forest is attracted by the oasis it has become. And what was once extremely challenging is growing easier all the time, not the least because the trees produce their own seeds. In essence, they are helping Jadav with his dream.

His story has been captured in a short film called "Forest Man" and it is proof that one person — against all odds — can make a difference. Jadav's life is a demonstration of the idea of dreaming the impossible while focusing on the possible.

There are so many huge challenges everywhere in the world that it would be easy to feel swamped and paralysed. What can one individual do, after all? The answer is: plenty. As long as you start small.

"Do small things with great love". According to many spiritual traditions, this is the place to start. Take a leaf out of urban planner's books. They talk about "the broken window syndrome". Apparently we humans tend to follow the pattern already in motion. So if we see a poorly kept piece of land with trash on it, we tend to throw trash as well. A car with broken windows, is more often repeatedly vandalised. The same is true with an abandoned building.



However if something is cared for, we tend to care more, too. That makes a practice like guerrilla gardening extremely interesting. It sets a new pattern in motion. With guerrilla gardening, a group of people target a small piece of neglected urban land. They

gather all the supplies to beautify it, sneak up in the night, do their gardening and then sneak away again.

What's left is surprising beauty and a new potential storyline.

This metaphor serves in a second way too — the practice of **Focus on the possible, Dream the impossible** demands the attitude of a patient gardener. A gardener employs longterm thinking and rolls with the rhythm of life. A gardener always begins with the end in mind. If you want shade for the summer time, then plant trees. If you want to recover a wasteland, then plant native species that will grow well in the climate you're in. If you want to satisfy hunger then plant vegetables. And if you want beauty, then plant flowers. Every garden has a purpose and the gardener plans accordingly.



With the goal in mind, the next step is to prepare the soil. Till the soil. Compost and feed it so there are plenty of nutrients. Prepare the beds. Make sure everything is ready. Next come the seeds or seedlings. Make sure they are kept moist enough that they start to grow. Keep on top of the weeds so the seedlings have a good start. And most importantly, take care of the plants while they grow. If you want to have carrots, then don't keep pulling up the plants so you can see how the roots are going! That's a recipe for ending things before they begin!

Just like every plant has a growing season, so do stories. You have to keep tending them as they grow and change. Sometimes your story seeds will take root and sometimes they won't — or they grow differently to how you expect.

Many years ago I was leading a training course on communication skills. One of the participants was someone who continually complained about other people causing his communication challenges. I decided to see if a story might land a different seed inside of him. I told this one:

Once upon a time there were two monks walking in the forest. They came upon a swollen river with a woman standing by the bank wringing her hands and looking distressed. "Won't you help me?", she asked. "I am desperate to get to the other side!" Without a second's hesitation the older of the two monks took her onto his shoulder and carried her through the rushing water, setting her down on the other side. The two monks continued on their way.

They had gone on some time in silence when the younger monk could contain himself no longer and turned on the older one. "I don't see how you could have done that!", he said loudly. "We have taken vows that we would never touch a woman, and yet you did back at that river! How could you?". The older monk looked at the younger one compassionately. "Ahhh!", he said. "I set her down back there. I see you are still carrying her!".

The entire group listened attentively, but I could see my story float off over the head of the person it was intended for. I let it go and we ended that part of the course, adjourning for 10 days. When the group reconvened, another participant rushed up to me and said: "I don't know what you did, but I just couldn't get those two monks out of my mind! They are still there!". The story didn't land with the person it was intended for, but it landed just the same and went to work. For all I know, it's working still!

Keep putting out your story seeds and tend them wherever they land. Focus on the possible, dream the impossible. And keep telling the story so that it will come true!





W O R K S H E E T

Personal & Group Practices

What is your impossible dream? Tell the future story as if it has come true. What had to happen now (the past), in order for your dream to come true in the future? Which of these elements is already present?

Identify the first simple, elegant steps that will begin to take you towards your goal. What surprising things could be part of this list? What if you made yourself a business card with your new title or surprise goal on it? What would it look like?

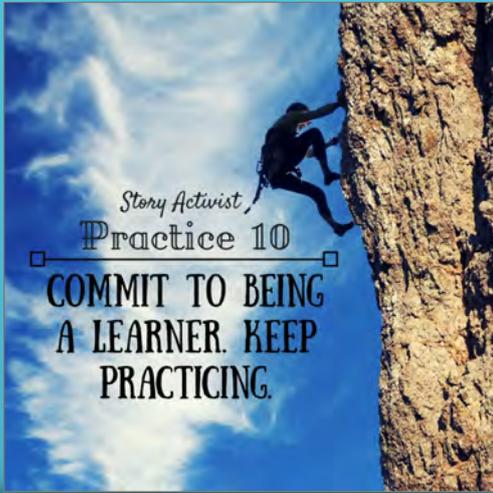
Once upon a time there was... How does this new story begin? What are the characters in this story? Which one are you?

Mock up a newspaper or a popular magazine with your story on the cover. What does it look like? Get someone to interview you as if the new story were already unfolding. What energy does this unleash? What do you now see about steps you can take?

Reinforce the new story. Write a series of sub-stories from the perspective of different people engaged with the new story. See what they have to say about how the new story is unfolding. What can you learn from them about the small, possible things you could do right now to move towards your impossible future?

Questions to ask yourself

- Where and how can I invite others to have fun with my impossible story?
- If I were a super hero with a rare and interesting talent that could be helpful in this situation, who would I be? What is my talent? How do I have this talent already? Who else has this talent?
- If I had such a thing as a pair of magical glasses that could help me spot opportunities, what would I see? Where is an opportunity lurking, just waiting for me to find it?
- What would happen if I decided to focus on one impossible thing before breakfast every day for the coming week?



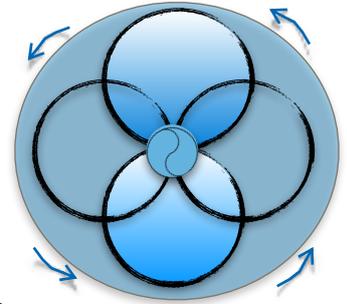
PRACTICE 10

If you want to be a practitioner, you need to keep practicing! That makes a commitment to learning an incredibly practical -- and enjoyable -- thing! Invitation is magnetic. Staying on your own learning edge invites others to be in learning, too!

Commit To Being A Learner. Keep Practicing.

Deciding to be a perpetual learner is an important stance in the work of Story Activism. Many martial arts forms call this "beginner's mind" — the open slate that enables a practitioner to learn something from each person and every moment.

The first thing to remember is that **life isn't linear.**, although most stories of success would have it look that way. Staying in practice helps you to continue to experience solid ground, even as everything keeps shifting. **The Fourfold Practice of Story**, begins with working on our own body of material. Keep tending yourself and your stories so that you work with and clear storylines that trigger you.



The more you work with your own stories, the less they will get in the way when you are faced with other people's material. You may think you're working with a story "out there", but all stories have a reflection "in here". And who knows when you'll end up wearing someone else's "story-o-type"!

Committing to being a learner means that you are supporting yourself to be able to try and fail and still keep going. Each time you do, you learn more, just like a storyteller keeps polishing the story they're telling with each different group. A diamond is just a piece of coal that withstood all that pressure to become a diamond!

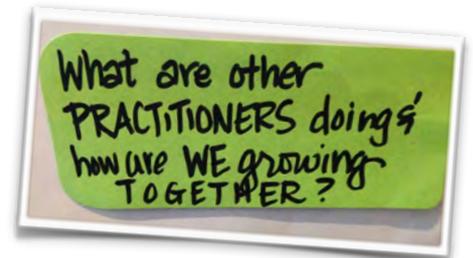


The second part of the Fourfold Practice is being able to listen to others and — when it is most needed — to share your own story. Of course this demands a different kind of listening — listening to understand. When you are listening to someone else with the intention of finding their brilliance and understanding their contribution, you automatically create a totally different kind of field to what people ordinarily experience. This kind of listening encourages a new — and maybe even a better — kind of story to show up.

I call that "listening forth" a better story. All of us are capable of this magic.

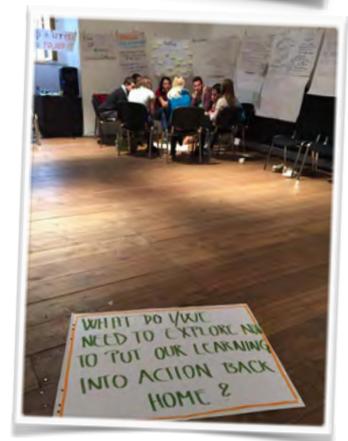
By listening carefully to someone else, you just might find someone you want to learn with or from. Part of the learning journey and being a practitioner is about apprenticing yourself to someone to learn something new. Of course that might be to an older, maybe wiser, person. Or it just might be to a younger cooler person! You can never tell! See who attracts your attention and follow up!

The third wave in the Fourfold Practice is about making spaces to host the stories that matter. It certainly is true that the stories which have no place to be heard and no place to go can get dramatically stuck. Every story needs an audience if it is to move, shift, and change. I've often thought that if there is a slow food movement, there should also be a **slow listening** movement. Stories need space and time and a good airing in order to build the foundation of trust so they can change.



Holding space like this and deeply listening to other takes emotional resilience. Be sure you've worked on yours and you keep alert to your own well-being while working with stories!

And finally, be part of a storied community — a community of practice. Be sure you're hanging out with others who are committed to learning and supporting you to stick with your purpose. Working with others can help you to keep integrating and enhancing what you're learning so it can become second nature.



If there were an Olympic discipline around storytelling, that's exactly how you'd be getting ready — working on each of the 10 practices, checking with a coach about what you've learned and stepping up to the next level of practice.

You've GOT this!



Remember...

You ARE a Story Activist! You have practices that can support you to make a difference. You can continually build your capacity. You don't have to be perfect right now -- every moment is just practice for the next moment.

Be a mate. And find mates. It takes a field to host a field. We are more and stronger together. Stay in practice to be a better practitioner. Use the 10 practices take you on the next spiral of the journey.

Keep awake. Continue to use the 10 practices to help you stay awake to the stories you live, work and create in. Keep telling stories that lead us to a more generative future..



worksheets

Personal & Group Practices

Identify and explore your learning edges. Take a look back through this e-book. Where are your learning edges around each of the 10 practices? If you had to create your own "personal PhD programme", what would it look like? Where would you start?

What does being a learner mean to you? Is learning always serious? Can it be fun? When have you felt you had the best learning of your life? How did that happen? Consult your own stories to see what you can find out that can help you.

Who is the most solid practitioner I know? What can I learn from him/her about how to stick with it?

Review each of the 10 practices. Which one attracts you the most? Which one attracts you the least? Why is that? Which one is the edgiest for you? Why? Which one do you know the most/least about? What will you do with what you find out?

Questions to ask yourself

- What else about story intrigues me now? (What do I most want to explore and practice?)
- What/where is my learning edge?
- Where can I break out of old habit in my life?
- Who do I most want to learn from?
- Who/where is my community of practice?
- What commitment am I prepared to make to myself around Story Activism?
- Where do I see examples of Story Activism that intrigue me? What can I learn from them?

Need more resources?

Check the Resources page on the SOAR website at the address below!





Welcome, Story Activist!



The world seems full of stories about what's out of order, what's broken, what's failing. Every day we hear stories that make us fearful and seem to drive us apart. But it doesn't have to be that way. For every story of pain and violence, there are also stories of caring and collaboration, kindness and creativity. It all depends on what we pay attention to. And what we feed.

The most important thing to know is that **we live in a story, and that means we can change it.**

I decided to call myself a Story Activist because I want to work with stories that help to create the kind of world I want to live in. I want to make use of our most powerful resource as humans — our imagination. That's the nation I belong to, and you do too! The most direct way to influence imagination is through stories. And I decided I wanted to be able to get good at seeing stories in action and learning how to use them for positive systemic shift and for accessing collective intelligence for critical issues. I wanted to see how they could help us create a more flourishing future together. **Thank you for joining me on this journey!**

I invite you to be in a state of inquiry about yourself, your life and the world. What is it that you most want to help create? What is calling you? What is your unique offering to the world? What story could lead you there? I also invite you to be open to learning — wherever it comes from and in whatever form.

Wake up your Story Activist senses so that you can capture what's going on all around you to support yourself and others. On this journey, stories, questions, and conversation about who you are, what you hope to do and what you long to accomplish, and who we can be together, will light the way.

I'm looking forward to what we will discover together — please keep in touch! And remember — you ARE a Story Activist!

xxMary-Alice

Mary Alice Arthur
Story Activist

Stories

are the human operating system

frame how we see & act in the world

can be a gift & a beacon

can turn barriers into bridges

are a place where we can

meet in our humanity

They help us discover & activate
the greatest potential of people,
places and things

I believe in the power of *Story*

I am a Story Activist

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