

The Circle of Story, Vision, and Leadership

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Today one of the most transformational things any of us can do is to listen deeply to the stories of others. For eight summers now, I have spent many evenings in a circle of leaders who are there to listen intently and to speak honestly and directly to one another. As often as a Vermont summer will allow, we meet outside under the stars with blankets across our laps and lanterns at our feet. We face one another and endure moments of nervous laughter as we settle into the presence of this place and one another. A question will be posed and awkward silence will follow. Then a cough, an adjustment of the chair, a faltering start and soon each of us will meet the eyes of the story-teller and know that tonight, perhaps, we will glimpse their soul. These evenings have included painful revelations for the storyteller as well as painful revelations for a listener gone unnoticed by the storyteller. There have been nights of tight, nervous jitters as well as fall-over, belly-ache laughter. Through the deepest and most honest of stories, we have been both drawn together until late at night, and also left adrift, uncertain how to face or help to heal one another. On many occasions, our thoughts are spoken in a nod or an embrace. Often, we let the silence of the night speak for us.

Listening to and telling a story is not a casual past-time or a source of entertainment, (though it can feel like both), but something more powerful: it can be the resistance of our heart against business as usual. The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks to this power of story: “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories have also been used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of the people but stories can also repair that dignity.” In this way, stories bridge boundaries. I have come to appreciate that all life needs boundaries, that boundaries and edges exist in both nature and culture, but our human predicament is that *without constant care and attention soft boundaries always tend toward hard boundaries*. We, humans, are capable of creating farmers markets and New York’s central park, but we are also capable of creating the Berlin Wall and the

triple wall now going up between Mexico and the US. Boundaries are created, too, between the way we categorize ourselves and our ideas: science and religion, farmers and hunters, dreamers and doers, humans and non-humans. By telling stories we can choose to break down these categories, to keep soft and permeable the boundaries between us and our different ideas, to turn hard boundaries into soft boundaries.

I aspire to learn from those who have committed their life to protecting both the land and the people to understand how powerful story can be in helping bring our nation toward what bell hooks, who explores the connections between black self-recovery and nature, describes as “a culture of belonging.” I have seen how sharing story has created among very different people a sense of revelation, empathy and connection, which is the only solid beginning for shared work. For me personally, nothing that we have done at Knoll Farm has been as instructive as these efforts to speak and listen for each others’ stories. I have observed how several of the fundamental stories of my professional life have been exposed as untruths, a process that that the Nigerian writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o calls the “decolonizing of one’s mind.”

Let me offer one example. Throughout my early professional life, spent primarily among white conservationists and environmentalists, I heard on countless occasions some interpretation of Maslow’s “hierarchy of need” as justification for why economically disadvantaged people would not have an appreciation of land and nature. I’ve heard often the explanation that economically disadvantaged people not only don’t appreciate nature but would not support or volunteer for organizations that care about land and nature. The commonly expressed position would go something like this: “the people in this housing development (or this neighborhood) are never going to appreciate that river until they became more economically self-sufficient.” Maslow’s research and writing, now more than 60 years old, is still often cited as a justification for not engaging with a group of people who were different in appearance and class.

Through listening to the actual stories of economically disadvantaged people, or people who were different from me by race or political ideology or profession, ideas that I had

accepted as truth were repeatedly challenged. At first when I heard a recent immigrant with no financial resources talk about her love of an urban garden, I treated it as quaint and “a great story.” But as I heard similar stories from similar people being repeated in different words and languages, I knew there was a deep meaning. Only then= did I begin to painfully observe how my own privilege and professional aspiration was actually insulating me from sharing the quality of relationship to nature that others with less “economic advantage” seemed to have. The story of a hierarchy of need was so firmly lodged in my mind that even after years of hearing the stories of deep connection and relationship to land from many economically disadvantaged people did I begin to question my basic assumptions. Why am I surprised by what I am hearing? Why do I assume something else from him than what I am actually observing? Finally, during one particularly beautiful cobalt night of story telling and story listening, did I collapse into my own bottomless awareness that a story that was deeply ingrained in my psyche was a product of a particular time and ideology and was keeping me from engaging with others and accomplishing my own dreams, which might also be their dreams. Being able to hear the stories of others, and share my own often unspoken story, has helped me to recognize those stories that I have lived by that are no longer true, or never were true. And to the same degree that I was being hurt by this story, I came to see how the story was hurting others. bell hooks puts it this way in her important book, *Belonging*: “Unmindful of our history of living harmoniously on the land, many contemporary black folks see no value in supporting ecological movements, or see ecology and the struggle to end racism as competing concerns.”

A large and powerful labor organizer tells us a dramatic account of how hard he had tried unsuccessfully to protect a mouse found onboard a fishing trip. A urban farmer stands before us to recount the story of her survival of rape and how this had informed her activism. A conservationist tells a story about being stalked by a bear on the shores of an island in southeast Alaska, which was followed by a young lawyer recounting her experience of shopping with her daughter and her sense of shame and fear at being followed by the store detective. An older woman, at the peak of her career, tells how she still feels the distinctions created by her class and race. A Tarahumara man retells the

ancient story of Seri elders who stood in the ocean waves and called in the turtles, both for food and also for sacred ceremony that protected the turtles as gods. An older man, well-known and established in his profession, shares with us the real journey he's made from arrest and prison to defender of the land. A young woman explained how her grandfather, who came to America with nothing more than his suitcase, inspired in her a commitment to social justice and to place. The night air grows cold and dark. We listen. We realize that nothing is as it appears.

Story has the power to foster wholeness and community, and it has the power to fragment and divide us further from one another. The distinction between the two is often experienced as the story of "us" versus the story of "me." The culture I grew up in rewarded the story of me far more than it celebrated the story of us. Sure, I remember many childhood celebrations of collective joy and sorrow, like putting a man on the moon or the assassination of Martin Luther King, and some of those collective memories have become the story of my life, but I recognize in myself the drumbeat of a different story about my individual success, that my story was about my success: what college I went to, what positions I've held, my social status, how successful or not my work had become.

I have found it transformational to my own life to learn how the story of me is an illusion, that it is always more deeply about the story of us. I and my work in the world are, and always will be, a collective effort; I am the alchemy of my relationships. This idea of the deep human connection between us, our community, and our land is captured very eloquently by the New Mexican poet and historian Juan Estevan Arellano in his translation of the word *querencia* as: "the tendency of humans to return to where they were born. Affection, responsibility, brotherhood, love of home, the space where one feels secure, the place of one's memories, the tendency to love and be loved."

Even with this awareness, our ego (the story of me) is always present alongside our relationships (the story of us), and we are always made fragile when we allow our ego to take control of the story of our lives. I have heard the story of me portrayed in many

different ways, thinly-veiled or outspoken, but the result is often the same. When we tell stories that reflect our standing, our successes, our acumen, our sophistication, our righteousness, our correctness, a feeling of the opposite of wholeness—separation—fills the room. What can those listening do with this story, other than focus on the story teller, judge him or themselves, and feel uncomfortable? When we tell stories that reveal more of the fullness of our journeys, the atmosphere changes. When we reveal that we have questions, not just answers, there is an opening to discovery for all who listen. When we reveal our strengths and our vulnerabilities, our fears as well as our passions, our losses as well as our successes, the listeners receive the gift of a more complete picture of the storyteller as well as themselves. When this happens, we are doing what humans have learned to do—what whole communities work is about—transcending our habits, understanding that we do not need to justify or qualify our presence. We need only to be present to ourselves and others.

The power of the story circle emerges through what is revealed: by the stories, about the story tellers, and also about the group itself. What is the capacity of this group to know one another? Equanimity and patience are needed for the deeper significance of the circle to emerge. For example, often the story of me will present itself, as if to say, “I am here,” before the story that says, “but this is who I truly am” can emerge. Many times, a challenging and difficult story is told by a person who feels the need to test the capacity of the group to accept who they are: does this group really have the capacity to hear my story even when it is painful for them to listen to? Will you hear my story even when my politics are different from yours? When the listeners in the circle prove their capacity to take in each story, without judgment, but for what is revealed, the collective mood changes and there is opportunity to dive deeper together. The leader whose ego is her defining characteristic will come to see it: perhaps the awareness is delivered by witnessing the same characteristic in someone else’s story or perhaps it arrives on its own in the relative safety of sleep, but it will come. The older man who has been quiet all evening may choose at the very last moment, as people are getting up to leave, to tell the story that no one will ever forget.

Story is needed more than ever in our efforts to connect to one another and to the land. Over many years of using story as a tool in our leadership programs, we know that telling and listening to stories deepens one's leadership in three fundamental ways: story helps us to be empathetic, which is necessary to collaboration; story helps us to broaden our view of what is possible, which is essential to vision; and story helps us to recognize how our success is bound up in another's success, which we call reciprocal transformation.

Stories help us see one another more clearly and fear one another less. Through such empathy, stories help us to cross the borders that separate us from one another. Sharing stories helps to create the atmosphere and context for relationships to shift, making foundation for collaboration and change. Kesha Ram recently won a seat in the Vermont General Assembly to represent a district in the state's largest city, Burlington, and to become the youngest member of the state legislature and its only woman of color. Kesha, who is also an alumna, related to me her strategy for political success: "The most important thing I did was to find the courage to sit down with someone I was a little bit afraid of and listen to their story."

In the mid-sixties, Lerone Bennett, Jr. wrote, "real community is based upon reciprocity of emotion and relation between individuals sharing a common vision of the possibilities and potentials of man. The basic fact of race relations in America is that white people and Negroes do not belong to the same community." We have experienced at Knoll Farm and elsewhere how telling and listening to stories enables us to recognize another's passions even if expressed in words and ideas very different than our own. This broader view can restore our own prophetic voices and make us more courageous. I've had this experience personally. I remember, as a young boy, taking in for the first time Dr. King's "I have a Dream" speech. While I was alive on in 1963 on the day he made that speech at Lincoln's feet, it was some years later that I was old enough to understand what the words meant to me. I remember sitting on a red couch in our living room and listening to a recording of the speech with my father. Nothing engaged me fully until I heard Dr. King say, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where

they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” I remember thinking, why isn’t that true now? Dr. King gave me as a young boy an experience of race that challenged me and made me think differently. And because he did it inclusively, in a way where I could see myself in the story he was telling, he inspired me to act.

The evening story circles at Knoll Farm create a space where we can be vulnerable together, and through that find shared respect. Through the act of sharing stories, we are connected through our longings and desires. We have shared emotion and relation, and these are the forces that later hold us together when our differences try to pull us part. This experience of shared story enables participants in our programs to give each other the benefit of doubt when the going gets rough, to give each other a second chance, and even to “cover their back.” I remember one very difficult moment when anger and betrayal had been triggered through the words of two participants and a third jumped in to remind one: “you heard his story. You know that’s not where he’s coming from.” The peace activist Gene Knudson Hoffman puts this aspect of story succinctly: “an enemy is one whose story we have not yet heard.” From this place of shared emotion comes recognition of deep reciprocity: what happens to you is, sooner or later, what happens to me; for me to succeed you need to succeed also.

In the work of becoming good allies to one another we know that story can be powerful beyond words, but what is story and what is not story? From our perspective, story is the narrative of what has happened to us, shared in a manner that conveys what we believe in about those experiences. Story is also the process of listening to and witnessing someone else’s experiences. The Webster Dictionary defines story as the account of an imaginary tale or the experiences of a person which deserve further narration, thus suggesting story’s possibility for both fiction and truth. Sometimes stories are overtly called lies, such as in the expression, “Don’t tell me a story.” It’s story’s ambiguity between truth and fiction that leads Majorcan storytellers to begin each story with “It was, and it was not.” Story, in its essence, is not as much factual as it is expressive of our values. In

story, the facts may not be true but the meaning is. In this important sense, one can not prove a story.

And herein lies story's primary difference from advocacy, which is the process of trying to prove something to someone else. The advocate, which I was trained to be, uses all of his intelligence and skill to prove a point for others to accept. The advocate relies heavily on facts, data, and information as proof. The storyteller tries to prove nothing, but to share her own experience and to draw others toward her through empathy, mutuality, and vision. Story holds the tension each of us carry between our own truth and fiction, and therefore is not ideology, which is the dogma and creed of a set, a class or a group of people. Ideology strives to clarify differences between people: white and black, good and evil; story assumes similarity between people, in that you may recognize something of yourself in my story.

Story is decidedly different from "listening sessions" which are an increasingly common tool of governments and nonprofits to connect with and listen to others. What sets story apart from listening sessions is that story requires reciprocity: the exchange that happens between storyteller and listener that holds the possibility of changing both. In our story circles, the listener is an active participant who must be prepared to become the storyteller at any moment. The listener and storyteller, in this important sense, are equals before one another. I have observed frequently how a dominant culture or person who holds power will ask others to tell their stories without revealing their own. Often this dynamic emerges in our programs, through a participant who asks questions but doesn't answer them, and it becomes clear how it is a privilege and a power to hear stories without having to share your own.

Center for Whole Communities seeks to reclaim the role of story in making change in America. In the dominant American culture, story has become the realm of entertainment and business, but not of social change. We give Emmys, Oscars and Pulitzers to stories that move us, and business pays the best and brightest out of college \$120,000 a year to create stories like "Coke adds Life," but where are the stories that

motivate us to work for social and environmental justice, food security, wilderness protection, or climate change?

There is a critical role for story in our movements for change that can not be played by science, by data and information, or by advocacy. The cultural explorer and writer Barry Lopez puts the challenge succinctly: “Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each others memories. That is how people care for themselves. Our goal is simple: we want our country to flourish. Our dilemma is simple: we have not told our people a story that sticks.” It is true. Those of us who care about people and the land have not yet told our nation a story that sticks. Every year at Knoll Farm, we are hearing and tasting parts of emerging stories that capture our imagination and have the potential to move America. Here are the essential questions we ask of one another that help these stories to emerge: How do we become more aware of our own story so that we might transform it? How do we find and speak the stories that call out the realities of our times? How do we paint a picture of a world that people want to go toward?

Marshall Ganz, a lecturer at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, has created a useful framework for teaching and developing new narrative strategies for social change. He describes the process as “recapturing the power of public narrative and learning the art of leadership storytelling.” Leadership storytelling includes exploring and creating the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now. Ganz’s work illustrates the deep relationship between story, vision and leadership. If story is the narrative of our values, vision is how those values, and the pain and longing that moved us to hold those values, plays out in our hopes for the future. Leadership, then, is our capacity to live to varying degrees within those values. When we rely on science alone as our dominant story, we are limited in our vision to what is observable or what can be documented; therefore the scale and scope of our leadership is diminished to what we can document as opposed to what we can hope for. Marshall Ganz explains, “Hope is what allows us to deal with problems creatively. In order to deal with fear, we have to mobilize hope. Hope is one of the most precious gifts we can give each other and the people we work with to make

change.” The power of story, then, is most fully realized when it is connected to vision and leadership.

What are the conditions for story to flourish in our professional lives? Creating the space, formal and informal, is critically important. The conditions for story might be simple, but they require time and intention. The space must be created, even at a staff meeting, where people can face one another without distraction and have the time to speak in ways that are longer and more complex than reviewing “to-do” lists. At informal settings like a staff meeting, an easy way to invite story is to begin with a personal check in: what happened over the weekend? Or, more ambitious, what have you recently experienced that informs what we do? When we are formally engaging in a story circle, we as facilitators also unpack for participants the basic elements of story-- such as plot, character, description, tension, recognizing where your story begins and ends, and allowing listeners to reach their own conclusions== to help us tell more effective stories. And then we sit back and pose a question:

- Who do you draw from to sustain your vision? Introduce us to them. Tell us about a single experience of this person that shaped how you think and act.
- Tell us about a time when you stood at a threshold in your life, and what happened?
- Tell us a story about a failure in your life and what did it bring to you?
- Tell us a story about your discovery that a long held belief wasn't true.
- Tell us a story about a time you were unmasked, and what was revealed?
- Tell us a story about a time you crossed a border.

When there is a pause in the stories, we shift gears to unpack the experiences we've shared so far. Those of you who told stories that were harder to tell, did you feel listened to by this group? What parts of the story resonated with you and why? What did you learn about the storyteller? What did you learn about yourself?

The act of listening to these stories has evolved my sense of our purpose as an organization. Today, I see our real work as contributing toward *a culture of belonging* that includes empathy for the world and for one another. Bell Hooks writes in Belonging, “can we embrace an ethos of sustainability that is not solely about appropriate care of the world’s resources, but also the creation of meaning –the making of lives that we feel are worth living.” Center for Whole Communities aspires for a world where all people can live fully and well, where everyone can belong and find meaning. Each year we see more clearly the obstacles: business as usual capitalism; inability to see and honor our differences, the history of race, class and privilege in our country; hyper-individualism of the American dream. These are some of the forces of isolation that separate us from one another and from the land and that can only be healed through relationship and understanding.

Each year, we also see the solutions: creating the context and atmosphere where change in attitudes and relationships can really happen. We see a different future emerging in the story circles: meaningful resistance, predicaments of the heart made visible, the presence of love, relationship across divides, reclaiming of history, the capacity to see a larger truth, and the courage to act in the face of fear. bell hooks says that “communities of care are sustained by rituals of regard.” We believe that story can be that ritual of regard that strengthens movements for change and helps protect both the land and the people.

Endnote: *CWC will be hosting a new Story Workshop with Peter Forbes and guests on three occasions in 2010. Peter thanks Scott Russell Sanders, bell hooks, Margo Tamez and Marshall Ganz for greatly expanding his understanding of story, and for the hundreds and hundreds of alumni who have shared their stories at Knoll Farm and elsewhere.*