TOWARD NEW GRAVITY

Charting a Course for the Narrative Initiative

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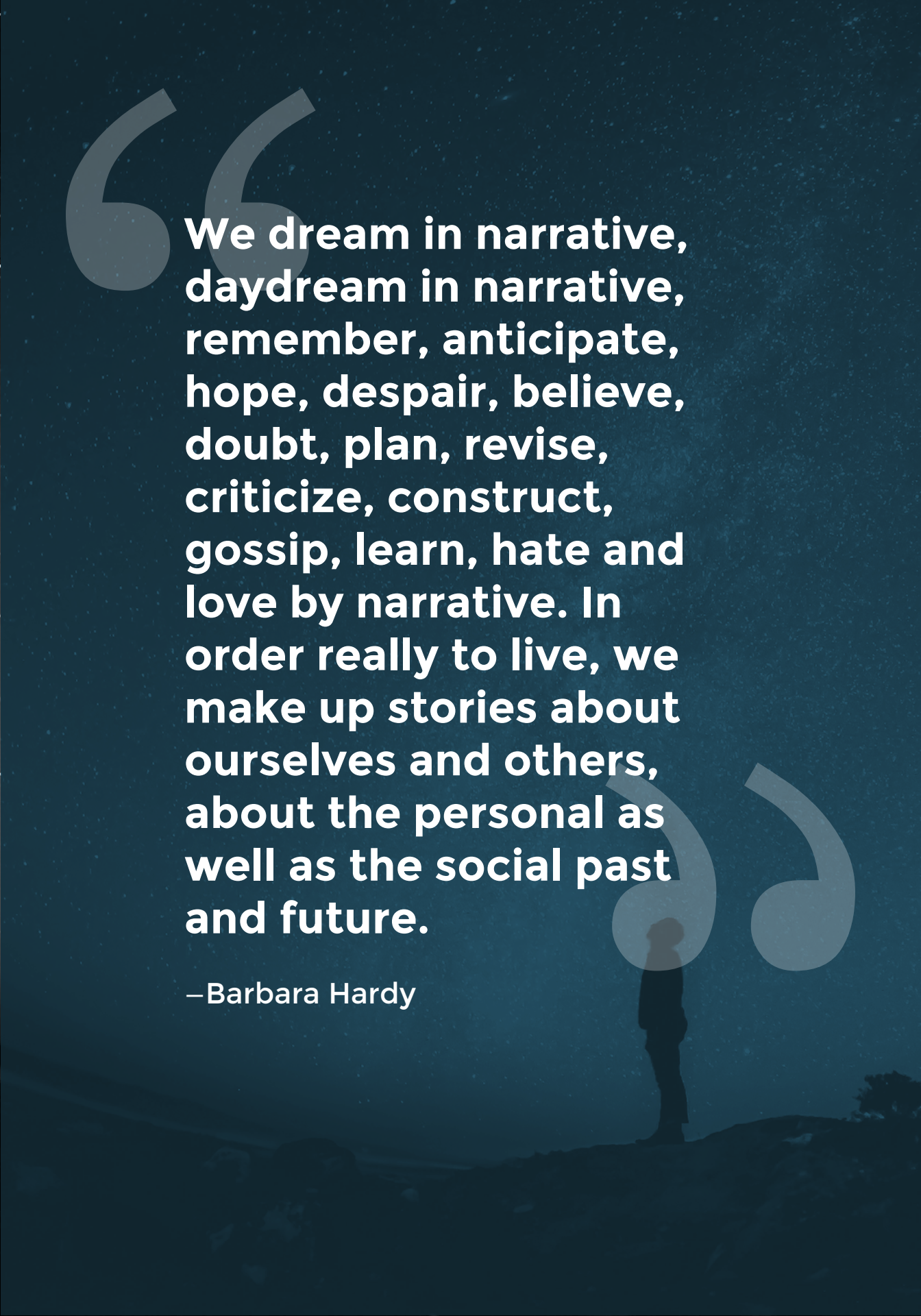"We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

—Barbara Hardy

FOREWORD

The field of narrative change is both emerging and eternal. From mythology to marketing, the human impulse – no, *necessity* – to make sense of the world, to justify values and bolster beliefs, is innate and immutable. We build, inherit and rely on schematic shortcuts for our own cognitive comprehension and physical survival. We learn codes and internalize signals meant to protect us: which colors and sounds represent safety or danger, whose authority we trust or reject, whose lives and dreams matter.

Humans, as pattern-seeking social creatures, assemble collections of mutually-reinforcing stories, in turn establishing shared common sense and constructing stereotypes about people and places, communities and cultures, ideologies and institutions. These core narratives, fundamental to our understanding the world and to our ability to navigate through it, nurture feelings of belonging and marginalization; that is, they subconsciously delineate who is *in* your group and who is not—who "we" are and what "they" do. We obtain, maintain and challenge systems of power based upon tribal affiliation, nationalist affinity, class and partisan distinctions, and constructions of coalitions. These deeply-rooted paradigms are mental models of how the world works and one's place in it. Often formed and fed by media, politics and pop culture, and ossified by personal experience, narratives often determine who deserves our solidarity or our scorn, our compassion or our contempt, our fear or fealty.

Narratives are messy. Nonlinear, emotional and contradictory, they often resonate with visceral meaning, feel authentic and ring true, regardless of their relationship to facts and evidence. They provide us with frames of reference that determine how we comprehend complex

realities and define the important boundaries between what we imagine to be possible, probable or practical. They facilitate interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and a vision for the future.

Narratives are powerful. They can swing juries and elections. They can fill prisons.

But they can also fill the streets.

–Jee Kim, Liz Hynes & Nima Shirazi
May 2017

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2016, after more than a year of deep discussion and planning, the Ford Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies announced the creation of the Narrative Initiative. Sparked by the recognition that pervasive and systemic narratives permeate every aspect of our daily lives, animate our popular culture and influence our politics, the multi-year collaboration was designed to support social justice leaders, advocates and organizers to better understand and deploy the power of narrative to build fairer, more inclusive societies.

The architects of the project imagined deep partnerships with well-positioned and experienced organizations to develop curriculum, trainings and placements through which participants in Atlantic Fellows programs[1] and Ford grantees would strengthen their ability to drive narrative change. This approach is grounded in the realm of language, meaning-making and symbols, but also critical to unlocking change of the structural, the institutional and the material. As noted by Ford's Darren Walker and Atlantic's Chris Oechsli in their joint announcement last year, narrative is "critical to advancing transformational change in systems, policies, and practices."[2] The initiative was also created to connect a geographically and thematically diverse network to promote alignment, collaboration and shared learning on narrative-focused work related to racial, social, economic and health equity.

We on the small team assembled launch the project were ready to get to work and eager to see the conclusion of a long and dispiriting U.S. presidential election season. Less than two weeks after the announcement of the Narrative Initiative, however, the world shifted

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[1] The Atlantic Fellows are a global community of leaders dedicated to advancing fairer, healthier, more inclusive societies. Through an interconnected set of six leadership development programs located on five continents, Atlantic Fellows collaborate across disciplines and borders to understand and address the root causes of pressing global problems.

[2] Oechsli, C.G. and Walker, D. (2016, October 27). "Narrative Matters: A Letter to the Field."

under our feet. Overnight, the issues we had thought would top our to-do list in 2017 changed drastically. The new political landscape, in the United States and abroad, was both shocking and sobering. Political theater, of course, has always been an amalgam of the rhetorical and the real, a careful and calculated balance of hope and fear. But the power of narrative and the weaponization of language had rarely been leveraged so effectively by a candidate and a campaign, and the aftermath of the election demanded we step back and take stock.

The interventions we envisioned required recalibration in light of new conditions, trends and realities revealed by the 2016 election, including:

- The evolving use of data and social media. The profusion of digital communications tools, mediums and platforms have made it even easier for *memes*—in both the *evolutionary biology* and *social media* senses—to spread and gain traction. There is no doubt that symbols can succeed over substance in the new public square. Combined with increasingly sophisticated harnessing of big data, psychometrics and profiling, and "fake news," the 2016 election saw techniques of meaning-making and technologies of influencing behavior in ways previously unseen. As Jeremy Heimans from Purpose and Peter Koechley from Upworthy told us, the coordination of these capacities into contemporary "full stack media movements" demand increased attention.

- The vulnerability of democratic institutions, both young and old. Under the weight of right-wing populism, established democracies on both sides of the Atlantic are being put to the test, as they did in countries like Brazil and South Africa, with more nascent experiments in this system of governance. Many conditions are variable—political party resilience and reaction, the role and relationship of civil society and social movements—but the similarities are striking. Common threads are stitching together populist narratives—xenophobia and racism fueled by migration and demographic change, disaffection with economic liberalism and market fundamentalism, and disenchantment with establishment political parties.

- A reminder of the particular power of political campaigns and candidates to shape narratives, especially ones that realign constituencies and redefine the "we." Of course, campaigns that contest for national identity are not new, even when they aren't always remembered that way. In 1981, only a couple years after the Tories ascended to power in the UK, Margaret Thatcher offered this self-reflection in an interview: "[I]t isn't that I set out on economic policies; it's that I set out really to

change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul."[3] Given the contemporary iterations of this project, what is the role and responsibility of civil society and social movements?

In early February 2017, the Narrative Initiative set out on a targeted, though wide-ranging, listening tour of stakeholders from a range of disciplines and communities that work at the intersection (and sometimes at the edges) of social justice and narrative change. We sought to gather resources, learn from those steeped in this work, and identify needs, challenges, opportunities and best practices. Over the following 10 weeks, we spoke to more than 100 leading narrative and culture change champions. Among them were movement organizers, advocates, media producers and content creators, trainers, scholars and scientists, communications professionals, and other influential voices.

The ideas, advice and insight gleaned have been crucial to helping us refine our thinking and how we embark on the next three years, which we approach as an incubation period. The interviews were especially important as we approach curriculum design and cohort commencement dates, and imagine the steps required to catalyze community, collaboration, and perhaps even catharsis, across disciplines, cultures and borders. We expect to design and launch cohorts and other programmatic interventions, make progress and mistakes, share lessons and try again. **This report is a living document that will be revisited, revised and rethought as the Narrative Initiative incubates. It is not meant to conclude or decide; it is meant to observe and orient.**

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[3] Thatcher, M. (1981, May 03). Interview with Ronald Butt. Sunday Times.

> **We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.**
>
> —Anaïs Nin

2. THE NARRATIVE COSMOS

The universe of what could be considered social justice-oriented narrative work—from individual experts and organizations to networks and projects —is unsurprisingly vast. It encompasses everything from neuroscience and behavioral psychology to film impact producers and a method of organizing Harry Potter fan communities dubbed "cultural acupuncture." In the course of our conversations, we identified a number of broad categories that can help delineate and offer some order to this vast spectrum. These clusters are not hermetically-sealed, of course, and there is much overlap and integration within and across these bright stars and planetary systems in the narrative night sky.

Cognitive & Social Science

Pioneered by sociologists such as Erving Goffman, social psychologists like Susan Fiske, and cognitive linguists like George Lakoff, this sector operates at the intersection of neuroscience, language, behavioral psychology and other social sciences. It includes both individual academics and consultancy firms like FrameWorks Institute and Topos Partnership. Their work studies how mental schemas, metaphor, framing and the ordering of ideas shape the way humans understand the world, social problems and their solutions. By applying the lessons of psychology, cognition and linguistics to social change communications, organizations can activate narratives that support their goals and help rewire common sense, public opinion and political beliefs.

Strategic Communications

Leveraging the work of both the scientists and researchers, strategic communications experts like Fenton Communications design values-

based, public-facing messaging and media campaigns with the end goal of delivering a particular policy change, electoral victory or shift in opinion or behavior. These messages are often time-limited and aimed at targeted audiences and specific constituencies. While historically viewed as a discrete, supplementary component of advocacy and organizing, efforts by more narrative-focused communications specialists such as Spitfire Strategies and Hattaway Communications are engaging social change organizations in an effort to embed a media power analysis, messaging and communications strategies on the front-end of campaigns and goals, in concert with the deployment of other tactics like arts and culture engagement to achieve longer-term impact.

Big Data Research & Analysis

An emerging sector, services like Protagonist (formerly Monitor 360) and MediaCloud dig deep into traditional and social media to measure, analyze and assess the impact of media and narrative change-focused projects. They scrape big data, harness algorithms and offer quantitative approaches to inform campaigns at both their inception and evaluation. For example, the Gates Foundation hired Monitor 360 to inform their Common Core Curriculum advocacy efforts with detailed analysis about what and how teachers thought of their education reform projects.

Storytelling & Sharing

Some organizations use personal testimony and autobiographical storytelling to powerful and persuasive effect, calling into question deeply held assumptions and biases and expanding capacity for empathy and solidarity. Organizations like the National SEED Project and Narrative 4 use interpersonal engagement, testimony and story sharing workshops to reach individuals across political (and narrative) divides with the aim of building bridges and transforming attitudes and beliefs. Even the oral history project, StoryCorps, can fit into this category, as its popularity and public face often work to universalize individual human experience and help break down barriers of difference and discrimination.

Movement Building

Marshall Ganz, reflecting on the power of narrative to motivate and mobilize people toward a political call to action, has noted, "Storytelling may be what most distinguishes social movements from interest groups."[4] Training organizations like Auburn Seminary combine strategic communications and narrative skills with political education and

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[4] Ganz, M. L. (2001). The power of story in social movements.

analysis of the context in which organizations, campaigns and movements operate. They train organizations and individuals how to craft and deploy inclusive, collective stories—what Ganz calls "public narrative," that is, the "practice of translating values into action"[5]—in support of a campaign or longer-term objective. For instance, the Center for Story-Based Strategy's "Narrative Power Analysis" helps identify dominant narratives and how to disrupt them at the "point of assumption." Other trainers employ tools like the "Hero's Journey" to structure story arcs, draw out heroes and villains, and articulate and prioritize potential solutions. And organizations like Grassroots Policy Project use narrative tools as a means of facilitating greater alignment between organizations on long-term objectives.

Creatives & Cultural Organizers

Influencing mass audiences through music, film and TV, videogames, comedy, sports and faith is critical to shifting values and changing public discourse. Visual artists, documentarians and celebrities can play outsized roles in conveying particular messages that inject and legitimize values and diversity of thought into culture with broad appeal and distribution. This rich and complex network includes not only culture makers, but organizers and connectors like Liz Manne, dream hampton and Ellen Schneider who straddle multiple communities. Organizations that connect disparate worlds include Color Of Change's Hollywood Culture Project (hosting writers room salons), Culture/ Strike (connecting artists to social movement organizations), and BRITDOC's Impact Producers program (training artists and advocates to increase the reach and ripple effect of films).

Although there is no set formula for cultural engagement, effective models can operate upstream or downstream of cultural and creative content, and are largely based on personal and professional relationships. The fruits of its labor can be as viral as a hashtag, as subtle as blind casting, or as public as Lemonade.
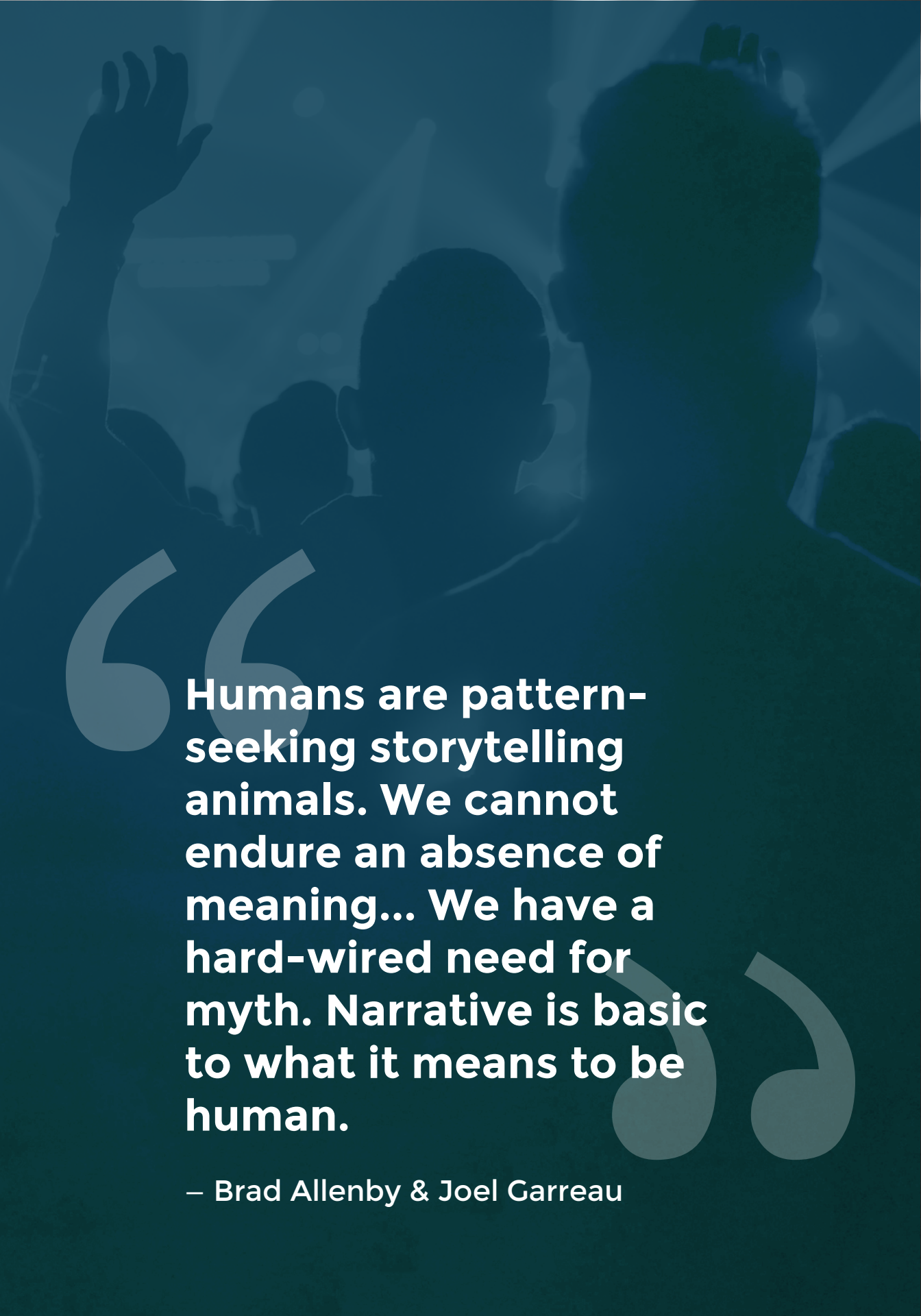
Narrative Strategists

Though this may be a category of our own invention, we believe it is important to name this small but critical cluster of individuals. Narrative strategists bring multiple disciplines to bear and bridge many of the sectors previously identified. They often work closely with groups to help design strategy at the organizational level, aspiring to fundamentally shift group orientation to long-term cultural change. With the view that

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[5] Ganz, M.L. (2011). Public narrative, collective action, and power.

"narrative change is about shifting paradigms and discourse over time,"[6] strategists like Ryan Senser, Bridgit Antoinette Evans and Andrew Slack advise organizations and campaigns on long-term strategy "designed over time to create profound shifts in the narrative, values, beliefs and behaviors of people."[7] Or as Senser puts it, "Narrative is a strategy towards an end; a tool for restructuring the way people feel, think and respond to the world."

[6] Kohn, S. and Dantas, L. (2016, August). JCR-US: Communications and Narrative Change Discussion Summary Report.

[7] Evans, B. (2017, March). *My Year of Breaking Open* [Video file].

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Humans are pattern-seeking storytelling animals. We cannot endure an absence of meaning... We have a hard-wired need for myth. Narrative is basic to what it means to be human.

"

— Brad Allenby & Joel Garreau

3. WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT NARRATIVE

While our interlocutors overwhelmingly expressed enthusiasm for the Narrative Initiative and the boldness of 10-year commitments from Atlantic and Ford, we did surface some pointed cynicism, centered largely around the concern that the Narrative Initiative represents a crescendo of a funder trend *du jour*. As someone succinctly put it, "Are we at *peak narrative*?" and wondered whether this is just the latest iteration of "magic word solutionism," a cyclical impulse in donor communities for shortcuts to social change. To be honest, we are relieved that we could draw out such frank reactions, and it underscored the need to be as clear as possible in terms of how we define narrative, our emerging program strategy and our long-term objectives.

It comes as no surprise that the terms *narrative* and *narrative change* themselves are deeply subjective and hotly debated. Definitions and interpretations abound. To many, *narrative change* has become a new touchstone of both "woke" philanthropy and grassroots nonprofits, replacing the shibboleths of social science-driven *framing* and anthropology/advertising-infused *storytelling* as keys to transcending the boundaries of traditional communications and messaging. As Brett Davidson of the Open Society Foundations has astutely noted, **"There is always a danger when a term becomes a trend, because it starts to become a shortcut for thinking—a term without precision—where everybody thinks they know what it means, but nobody really does for sure."**[8]

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[8] Davidson, B. (2016). Narrative change and the Open Society Public Health Program.

Terms like *story* and *narrative* are routinely used interchangeably, which might not matter much in everyday conversation. When it comes to strategic communications, campaign messaging and culture change, however, distinctions are not only valuable, they're necessary. With this in mind, what follows is our take on some useful definitional boundaries between the terms *frames, story, narrative* and *meta-narrative*.

Frames

To better make sense of the world around us, human brains rely on subconsciously constructing internal schemas to process the messages we receive and interpret the meaning of our own experiences. Our brains identify patterns, create categories and rely on stereotypes to help organize our understanding of a constant influx of information through language, images and symbols. Cognitive scientists use the concept of frames—"mental structures that shape the way we see the world"[9]—to describe this particular human phenomenon. Frames articulate our worldviews, which are in turn activated by language: cues in communication that generate unconscious, intuitive and emotional responses. Think, for example, about environmental "regulations." Now think about environmental "protections." These two frames can evoke strikingly different reactions to the same set of governmental agencies and practices.[10] As Susan Nall Bales notes, "Even small changes in framing will alter how we think on an issue,"[11] and effective advocacy relies on telling the right story in the right way at the right time.

Biconceptualism, Foregrounding & Backgrounding

Just as the human mind can juggle various values systems simultaneously, it can also hold multiple, even contradictory, frames at the same time.[12] Some people apply a liberal frame to domestic issues, while maintaining a rightwing view of foreign policy. Others are simultaneously socially progressive and fiscally conservative. Lakoff has named this dynamic *biconceptualism* (though perhaps *multi-conceptualism* would be more accurate), noting how carefully framed appeals can animate a set of values that already exist but may be sublimated in constituents. Therefore, framing is not a matter of political propaganda or message manipulation, but instead is a means of foregrounding certain frames, while backgrounding others (and hopefully, activating our better angels). Some, however, are more skeptical of this approach, perceiving framing less as a long-term culture shift strategy than a short-term, rhetorical tactic, driven by election cycles.

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[9] Lakoff, G. (2004). Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate.

[10] Lakoff, G. (2017, January 28). *The Public's Viewpoint: Regulations are Protections*.

[11] Bales, S.N. (2016, October 25-26). Personal Storytelling and Advocacy: What works?

[12] Lakoff, G. (2006, September 27). *Biconceptualism*.

Story

In a story, to put it simply, something happens to someone or something. A story is discrete and contained; it has a beginning, middle and end. Stories recount a particular series of events that occur in a particular place and time and often contain structural archetypes such as a protagonist, a problem, a path and a payoff.[13] From creation myths to creative means of preserving cultural tradition and communal memory, storytelling is the common language of human experience. Stories transmit a society's ideas, beliefs, behaviors, humor, style and trends from one person to another, inherited and imitated memes that collectively create the culture we live in. They can entertain just as they can instruct.

Context, Emotion & Values

Personal values and cultural context—those of the storyteller and the audience—are critical to a story's intention and reception. As Thaler Pekar notes, "stories provide rich insight into complex emotions and situations, and competing, or even seemingly contradictory, values. They bridge the rational and the emotional. And stories provide context, enabling us to create meaning out of complexity and confusion."[14] Stories that sit within and reinforce the hardwired frameworks in our minds have the power to build empathy and community, ignite desires, align goals and spur action.[15] Powerful stories communicate something deeper, something shared, something perhaps even *universal*, about one's own values and experiences. They can resonate not just with a message, but with meaning.

Narrative

Narratives are often described as a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief.[16] Unlike individual stories, narratives have no standard form or structure; they have no beginning or end. **What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning.** Thus, "stories can be *told*," according to communication strategist Jen Soriano, "while narratives are *understood* at a gut level and activated by simple words, sounds, signals and symbols."

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[13] Polletta, F., et al. (2016). The Challenge of Stories.

[14] Pekar, T. (2010, March 03). What, Why, and How Story Matters.

[15] Van Slyke, T., and Sen, R. (2016, November 30). How to be a better storyteller: Five questions social change makers need to ask.

[16] Morse, D.J. (2016, October 25-26). Personal Storytelling and Advocacy: What works?

Narratives merge the chief components of storytelling and framing, what Arizona State University professor Scott W. Ruston defines as "the *data* (the stories, what is told) and the *pattern* (how they are told and what is not told). The process of matching data to patterns happens repeatedly and continuously. People acquire the patterns through upbringing, culture, education and experience." Ruston elaborates:

> As people hear stories, they acquire the data and distribute it into roles and relationships according to the narrative patterns they already know and understand. If the story doesn't fit the pattern, they try an alternate pattern (or perhaps a different ordering of the pieces of data) until they can understand what is happening. This process occurs not just in individuals, but in groups and societies too.[17]

A number of people we interviewed identified another key distinction between values-based storytelling strategies and frame-based messaging tactics from narrative work: analysis. Stories and frames may or may not be grounded in analysis, but the power of narrative is rooted in its ability to analyze the past in order to make sense of the present and point to the path forward.

A Note on Power

We heard a great deal about power and narratives. As john a. powell reminded us, narratives operate within a broader historical and political context that determine their ability to articulate and silence, to include the stories of some and omit others. Stories, like politics and economics, are defined by power, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warned in her 2009 TED talk: "How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power." She continued, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."[18] **This is the narrative power to *define*, to make some subjects visible and while erasing other histories. But there is another mode of narrative power, perhaps less obvious and more potent, one which renders itself invisible.**

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[17] Ruston, S. W., (2009, September 03). <u>Understand What Narrative Is and Does.</u>

[18] Adichie, C.N. (2009, July). "<u>Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The danger of a single story</u>"
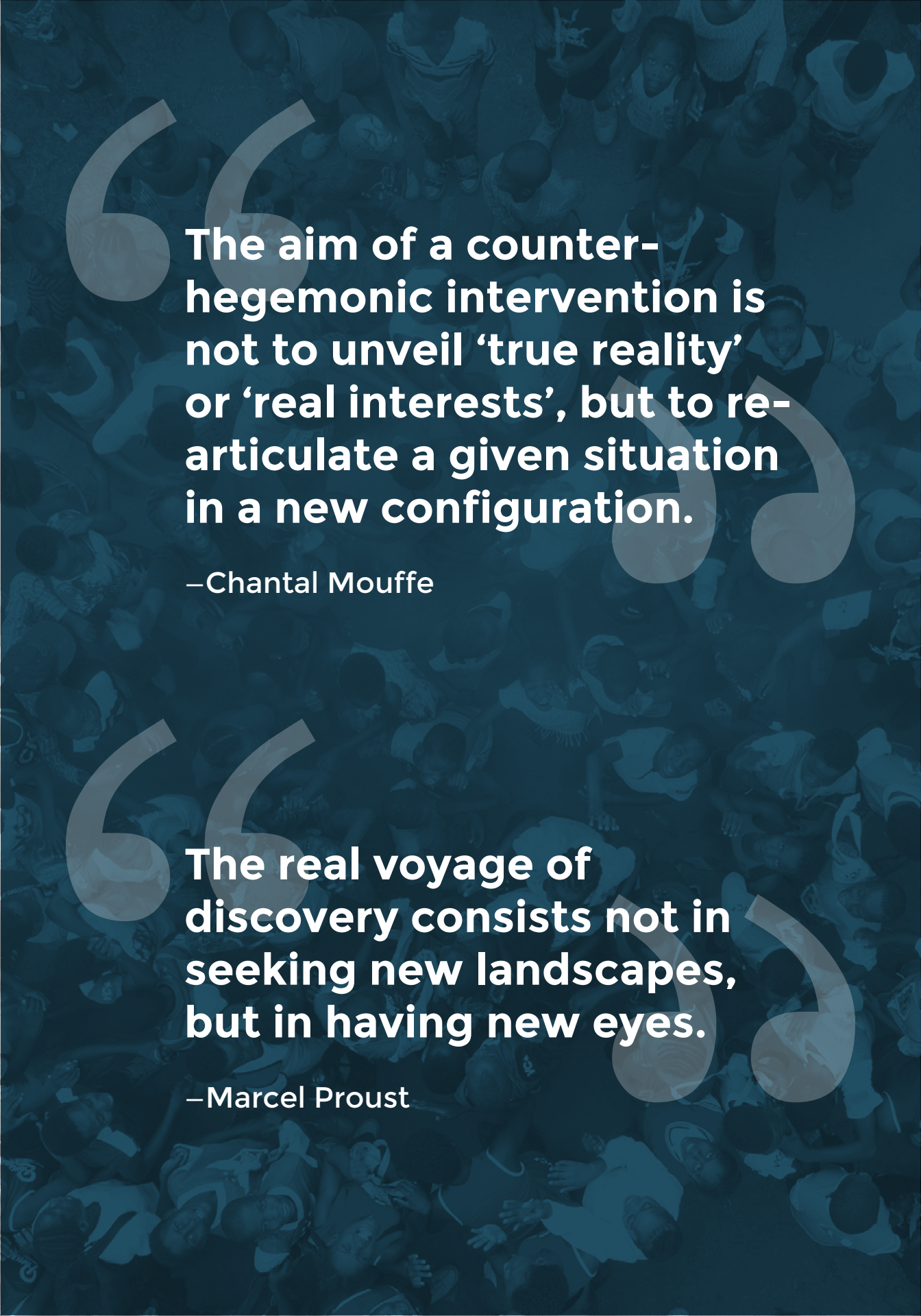
Meta-Narrative

Narratives characterized by pervasiveness and stubborn intractability are called by many names—common sense, worldviews, dominant narratives. We prefer the term *meta-narrative*. These meta-narratives are deeply embedded in a culture or society and consistently repeated and reproduced over time. They provide a foundational framework for understanding both history and current events, and inform our basic concepts of identity, community and belonging.

Meta-narratives structure how entire societies interpret the way things work; they animate stories with consistent messages and meanings. Their power is *reproductive*; their subjects and speakers unconsciously repeat and reinforce them. Their invisibility makes them that much more potent. Consider contemporary messages and narratives (poll-tested and focus-grouped) on why the minimum wage in the United States should be raised. They are likely to echo these sentiments: "If you work a full-time job, you shouldn't have to ask for a handout," and, "Hard-working Americans shouldn't need government assistance to make ends meet." At first glance, they resonate with our common sense and have been successful in raising wages in states, red and blue, across the country. But what are some of the meta-narratives they unconsciously and unwittingly reproduce? Well, that government assistance is shameful and that government *itself* should be avoided. And that there is a divide between the "hard-working" and the "lazy" that dictates the extent of our compassion.

The inherent inefficiency of government, as a meta-narrative, also determines the contours of a society's Overton Window, defining which stories are fantasy, which are magical realism, and which are sober non-fiction. And it pervades. Just as it defines the boundaries of what is probable, possible and unrealistic in setting a minimum wage, it also leaves single-payer healthcare to languish in the realm of utopia.

> **The aim of a counter-hegemonic intervention is not to unveil 'true reality' or 'real interests', but to re-articulate a given situation in a new configuration.**
>
> —Chantal Mouffe

> **The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.**
>
> —Marcel Proust

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK

These past months of research, conversation and no shortage of tossing and turning have been critical and formative for the Narrative Initiative. We developed a sharper sense of key concepts and a deeper appreciation for the breadth of the communities, disciplines and approaches that compose the universe we seek to connect. And we received strong feedback for the program interventions we are committed to launch later this year and a catalog of previously unconsidered directions and inspiring big ideas.

Where We Start

As we begin to think about how best to design our initial programs, we are faced with the enduring challenge of training and research that struggles to find uptake in organizational behavior or lasting capacity. We heard repeatedly that the field doesn't lack for practical trainings, useful curriculum or smart research shops; in the last decade alone, training infrastructure has been significantly strengthened via organizations like Opportunity Agenda and the Center for Story-Based Strategy. Yet challenges remain, like research accessibility, long-term retention of new skills and shaking up organizational inertia. Thus, the insight and advice we received from expert trainers and field-builders on pedagogy, tools and technical assistance, as well as program design and duration, was invaluable. From this counsel, we have drawn many clear lessons for the Narrative Initiative's initial mandate of curriculum development and training support for the Atlantic Fellows programs.

Customize & Socialize

Trainings and curriculum tend to fall into two groups. The first encompasses skills-based training and the practical application of narrative strategies in the field. For example, personal storytelling

programs engage directly with individuals and promote the idea of autobiography and intersubjectivity as a way to change hearts and minds. The second emerges from the tradition of popular and political education. These trainings begin by generating a deep analysis and a cohesive story about how we—as a community, country, or culture—have arrived at our current political moment. Participants are guided through the development of shared language, common values and tactical interventions. For the Narrative Initiative, customizing curriculum and training, balancing practical skills and sophisticated analysis to support both short- and long-term objectives will be key.

And rather than limiting training to a communications department, staff throughout an organization should be socialized in the power of narrative. Narrative strategy should not be treated as a discrete addition to a campaign, but understood as a critical institutional competency to develop.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Many of these skills-based practices are difficult to absorb, so we must learn by doing. Trainings ask people to unlearn the very communications lessons they've been taught in school, in advocacy, in journalism and in debate. Behavioral change doesn't happen overnight; people need lots of hands-on practice, especially in the context of their own writing. Lessons learned by the cognitive linguist Anat Shenker Osorio suggest that people need an intensive seminar and ongoing coaching to break old communications habits and implement new strategies.

Always Be Iterating

In addition to immersive messaging training and practice, we need to embrace the process of iteration. We have heard this from leaders in the culture space, investors like New Media Ventures and network builders like Jodie Tonita. The old model of lengthy testing before messaging and strategy are implemented has not served the field and certainly does not serve the political moment. Now is a time to experiment, to hold developing narratives lightly, test in real time, and be okay with failing and trying again.

The Long Tail of Support

The ability to retain and implement skills is directly related to the nature and length of engagement. Initial, in-person training must be paired with ongoing support and engagement. In general, interviewees discouraged any sort of training that lasted fewer than five days and emphasized continued technical assistance and mentorship over the course of a year. The longer the tail of support, the deeper and more successful the work becomes. Some of the key components for encouraging retention of new narrative

practices include, but are not limited to, one-to-one coaching and mentoring after in-person experiences and the development of strong networks where people can problem-solve and build group capacity.

All Narrative is Local

There is no substitute for trust and context when designing and implementing narrative training. We heard repeatedly that local partners are needed to ground curriculum and trainings in community and culturally-specific locations, whether in Oakland or Cape Town. Groups like FrameWorks and The Rules and individuals such as Marshall Ganz and Harmony Goldberg, have established networks around the globe and represent the type of partners we hope to work with to craft responsible, relevant and resonant programs.

Cohort Design

Knowledge retention and implementation of narrative strategies is also dependent on the composition, duration and depth of participant involvement in trainings. Individuals often participate in short-term training, and unless they are bound by a cohort (by issue, campaign, or other opt-in selection), sustained engagement can be challenging. Sometimes cohorts are internal to single organizations and external partners provide long-term support, or bigger organizations will develop internal expertise and training capacity, like Greenpeace International's story team. There is still much to be learned about how cohort composition and design influences impact. Especially during our incubation period, the Narrative Initiative will be testing differently configured cohorts—leaders from the same country who work on different issues; those that share issue concerns but across geographies; staff from organizations that are in a formal, time-bound campaign relationship; and those that share longer-term ambitions and intentions to align on meta-narratives.

Where We (May) Go

While curriculum and training-related lessons may be the most salient to the Narrative Initiative's near-term efforts to support leadership development, we heard a number of other observations related to the field at large. Some of the needs that were identified by multiple stakeholders are complex and don't have straightforward solutions. Some are moonshots, requiring patience and great risk tolerance. Given the extraordinary 10-year grants made by Atlantic and Ford, the Narrative Initiative is committed to an on-going and sustained exploration of these critical needs.

Community & Collaboration

While connections exist between different clusters in the narrative cosmos, many barriers remain to building a network of these diverse fields and actors that can eventually become self-reproducing and sustaining. For instance, we may aspire to connect musicians, advocates and data scientists, but building a stronger trust and community within single sectors is also a significant need. Meg Bostrom from Topos described the need for regular sharing of lessons from success and setbacks between her peer community of researchers. Also, while many programs share their materials freely, many innovative resources and tools remain proprietary or are scattered across the internet.

Though the Narrative Initiative is not designed to be a grantmaker during its incubation period, we have heard the desire for seed funding for fledgling narrative change-related projects, tools and resources. One idea that emerged from a number of conversations was establishing prizes for important work in this field, perhaps like the London School of Economics Action for Equity Award or the Media Impact Funders Festival Awards, that also create incentives for new networks to cohere and communities to collaborate.

New Technology & Tools

A generation of tools—software, platforms and services—that leverage big data and sophisticated quantitative analysis are newly available to social justice leaders and organizations. But *available* does not necessarily mean *accessible*. These new tools are powerful and promising, though not silver bullets. They are early iterations that are practically inaccessible to many nonprofits without adequate resources or expertise; they can require significant technical assistance to ensure users are able to fully leverage and utilize their capabilities. As Tate Hausman from the Analyst Institute reminded us, it took decades of constant refinement and countless ancillary supports, trainers and intermediaries to socialize sophisticated data-driven civic engagement practice into the nonprofit field. Uptake of these new analytic tools will also take patience and persistence. And finally, early applications have worked best in time-bound campaigns, tending to capture snapshots of the public conversation, rather than long-term efforts to shift cultural values and social norms.

Setting the Strategy Table

A number of seasoned stakeholders we interviewed lamented that there is currently no "strategy table" for narrative leaders; no trusted space to align, integrate and iterate. Once networks and trust are established, can alignment, shared long-term goals and powerful new narratives emerge? "Narrative change is an inchoate field," Cara Mertes

of JustFilms explained, adding her hope that the Narrative Initiative "will galvanize and align, unite and engage the field. The project can give form and structure to energy." We did uncover models from issue-based tables and diverse geographies that we can draw inspiration from. For example, the New Economy Organisers Network in the UK is building a narrative hub to align organizations working to change social norms and conceptions about the economy. But we were also cautioned not to overestimate our role or ability to single-handedly address this need. As the Perception Institute's Alexis McGill Johnson counseled, **"The Narrative Initiative shouldn't create the narratives, it should create the conditions for new narratives to emerge."**
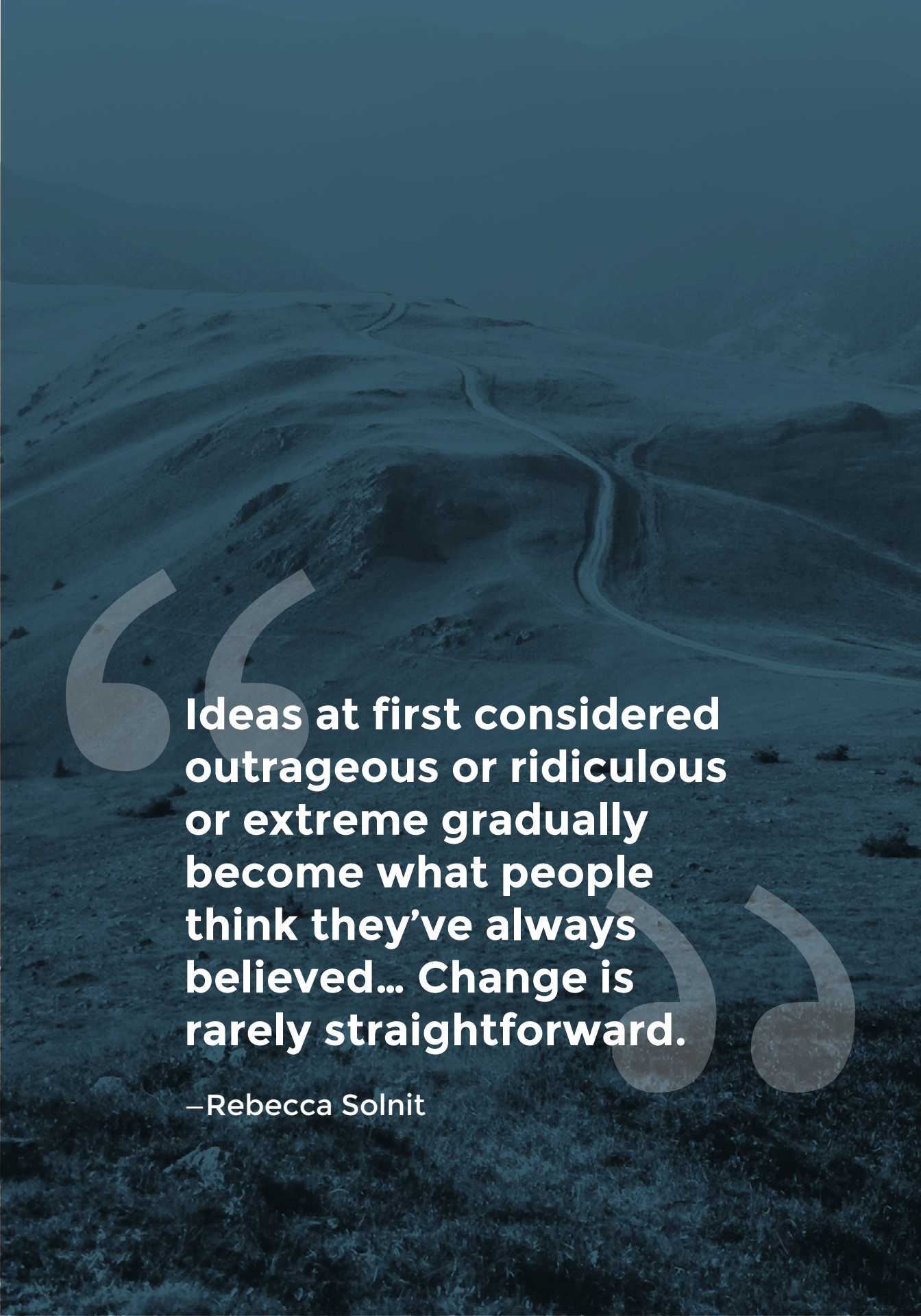
Narrative Change Needs a Posse

One idea that kept surfacing over the course of these interviews homed in on the need for a scaled proliferation of talent—campaigners, consultants and communicators—characterized by what Thaler Pekar calls "narrative intelligence—an ability to see the world through a narrative lens, able to recognize, elicit, learn from, and share stories in support of organizational goals and identity."[19] Alan Jenkins offered this short list of qualities shared by the posse he imagines: *Vision*—the ability to acknowledge and access the power of culture; *Experience*—actual time spent on the ground working with campaigns; *Fluency*—a familiarity and reputation within the advocacy field and also in creative and cultural spheres.

How might we get there? Some proposed a rigorous train-the-trainers model to build out a pipeline of dedicated narrative strategists. Others urged us to look for talent in unfamiliar and unlikely places, like the private sector—branding, marketing and design shops are populated with plenty of people eager to apply their talents to social change and cause. And what about leveraging academic institutions, beyond Atlantic's current fellowship programs?

The training of hundreds, if not thousands, of sophisticated, diverse and committed narrative strategists is a moonshot that would take years, maybe decades. Consider the long and uneven evolution of public interest law and the public defender system known as Gideon's Army. Building a new layer of talent and capacity is at once thrilling and daunting. Failure may be more than likely, but success just might be game-changing.

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[19] Thaler Pekar & Partners » Our Approach.

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Ideas at first considered outrageous or ridiculous or extreme gradually become what people think they've always believed… Change is rarely straightforward.

—Rebecca Solnit

5. TOWARD NEW GRAVITY

Perhaps one of the most hopeful messages we heard in our dozens of conversations was that the 2016 U.S. presidential election results, seen as part of a broader global trend, which instigated this listening project, should be considered an opportunity. A chance to rethink priorities, broaden bases and expand ambitions. And while the need to defend, react and protect will be constant, the moment demands that we consider a pro-active, longer-term strategy—a more ambitious agenda.

Aspiring for culture shift and narrative change will require unprecedented levels of alignment, coordination and creativity. In her post-election roadmap, "Five Ideas on Strategies and Tactics for Cultural Change," Erin Potts offered up a multifaceted and synchronized approach to organizing, movement-building and political campaigning. Her ideas may elicit nods, but none of them are simple fixes. Perhaps the toughest prescription, given the funding incentives that weigh so heavily on social justice leaders and organizations, is to:

> Stop talking about issues in order to win on issues. It sounds counter-intuitive, but in cultural strategies we may need to develop a strain of the work that stops talking about issues altogether and starts focusing on narrative leverage points--the cultural concepts, cues, and assumptions that sit at *the intersections of issues and at the heart of our individual and collective worldviews*. These are concepts like "difference," "opportunity" and "participation" or the cultural definitions of "family," "work," "equality" or "public" that tap into our values and core beliefs.

Consider Sisyphus. The slow, hard work of issue-specific policy change is akin to pushing a heavy rock up a steep hill, sometimes only to see it roll back down without concern for our valiant efforts. We know the terrain is tilted against us, as we struggle with deeply ingrained ideas about gender, race, the role of government, religion and market fundamentalism, to name just a few. What we don't often recall in the urgency of now is that this incline was created over many decades, through long-term planning to shape the terrain of engagement, to create a new common sense. Carefully selected campaigns advanced worldviews, not just issues. As infinite and inevitable as the slope we face may appear, the hill is itself composed of other rocks, stones and boulders that were placed to determine the degree of tilt, the treacherousness of terrain.

Narrative work, the shifting of consciousness and values, is not just a long game, it is *the* long game. It is not just about finding the right words to spread particular messages, but the ability to activate the underlying values and beliefs behind those messages. It's about normalizing justice, inclusivity and equity. Instead of pushing rocks up a hill, what would it look like to reshape the terrain itself? What, after all, would it feel like to have gravity on our side?

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