

STORY SPACE – ABOVE AND BELOW

Co-evolving Our Story Field: Exploring Conditions for Living a New Story

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In August 2007, we convened in Colorado to ask what it takes to create a ‘story field’ that can shift society into greater aliveness and wisdom. We intended, and got, a diverse mix of storytellers. Four threads wove together to shape the conference. How the story is told is as critical to its effectiveness as its content. Most people said they were changed by the experience. We opened the way for story workers to become more conscious of their power to shift our cultural story.

Through my work with Appreciative Inquiry, I have come to believe that the stories we tell ourselves shape the way we see the world, which shapes our behavior. More, as my colleague, Tom Atlee, puts it, collectively, our stories form a ‘story field’:

Just as a gravitational field influences the movements of stars and planets, so a story field influences how people behave and what they believe is real, good, acceptable, and possible. A story field can provide the means for profound social change. The feminist movement of the 1970s-90s and the neo-con movement which culminated in the States with the Bush presidency both shifted the story that society tells itself and lives. If we could bring together story field workers — journalists, curriculum developers, video game designers, film makers, novelists, musicians, artists, historians, etc., telling diverse stories informed by shared inquiries about the meta-story/ies we are striving to birth — then we could have a profound impact on the direction of society. In fact, if more people, groups, and institutions participated consciously in shaping the story field, it could BECOME a societal capacity. A culture’s story field would no longer control people without their knowledge or participation. It could be consciously crafted by its participants to serve their values and visions. Just as we elect people to govern us, we could co-create stories to govern us.¹

Tom’s vision caught my imagination. What would it mean to intervene at the level of our ‘cultural story’?

This question compelled us to act. We were caught up in a nascent story field of our own, one guided by a call to find others who believed that we can move towards a world that works for all by engaging the power of story. Thus was born the Story Field Conference – a gathering envisioned to shape a new story field.

What does it take to create the conditions for living a new story — at all levels, from personal to planetary?

Between August 26 and 31, 2007, we brought together eighty-three people passionate about the role of story in shaping our collective world view. We convened at Shambhala Mountain Center in the wilds of Colorado to consider:

- What is the new story that is already calling us?
- What emerging narrative is so powerful that it draws us to hope, care, and engage?
- How can our stories actually shift society into greater aliveness and wisdom?

During the gathering, most participants lived a new story – in which diverse people showed up in their unique glory and felt connected to a larger purpose while held by a spirit of deep community. And just so that you know it was real, let me be clear, it wasn't all sweet harmony! In fact, there was something to trigger just about everyone. Tensions surfaced that usually remain invisible: male/female, people of color/white, indigenous/Western, young/old. Thanks to the hosting team, there was room for anger, fear, grief and joy to be heard without any need to fix anyone or anything. Dissonances evoked curiosity, not polarization. The deep connections formed made visible the possibility of community in which a sense of belonging results from freely expressing, rather than suppressing, individual differences.

How did we do it?

From the beginning, four threads wove together to shape this conference:

- A clear intention to understand and work with our cultural 'story field';
- A diverse mix of people to explore the questions posed;
- Attention to diverse forms of presence (head, heart, body and spirit); and
- Emergent process to invite the opportunity for novelty and breakthrough.

The conference unfolded in wildly unexpected, challenging, and, for most, very productive ways.

In the beginning...

We reached out to our friends and colleagues who were drawn to the idea to help in two arenas: reaching the diversity of people we envisioned coming together; and creating a rich, nutrient space for whatever emerged through the people who came.

Our first planning call included the



photo: John Abbe, johnabbe@gmail.com

mix of the story tellers we hoped to attract. We began in silence, as we did every meeting, to touch into our own centers and that mysterious space in the middle. We each spoke to what drew us to participate and what we aspired to create together. We realized that multiple modes of meaning-making were central to our work and created an invitation composed of music, poetry, art and the web.ⁱⁱ We committed to reach out to people of color and young people, using seed money from the Kellogg Foundation. We priced the conference to supplement that seed money and then reached beyond our comfort zone to invite people outside our usual networks. We supported the organic ripple of invitation to spread as best we knew how.

Preparing the space

Tom and I knew that we wanted to create an emergent space in which the spirit of community formed to surface insights, deepen relationships, open possibilities and inspire action. Years of experience have taught me that the more diverse the participation and more ambitious and intangible the intention, the greater the challenge of hosting a welcoming space. I knew this was not solo work! I reached out to my roots for partners, initially Anne Stadler, Mark Jones and Candi Foon. Through the seven years of Spirited Work, an Open Space community of practice conceived by Anne, we had learned many lessons together of what it means to be in community, how to welcome disturbances as gifts, supporting what is wanting to emerge.ⁱⁱⁱ We met for two days to clarify our intentions, but only discussed the mechanics of process for perhaps the last 60 minutes. Primarily, we explored our aspirations for the gathering and deepened our already loving relationships, letting go of unspoken baggage, small jealousies and frustrations, so that we could be strong and fluid with each other to best serve the conference. From that base, other friends, old and new, joined us for hosting.

During the gathering

The people

We intended a diverse mix of storytellers, and we got them! We had significant diversity of age, ethnicity, gender and class. We prepared for different forms of presence (head, heart, body, spirit) and expression (music, movement, art, words and silence) and they all showed up.

The process

Into the gathering we went, where a myriad of cultural tensions – the unspoken baggage of our Western society – surfaced. Yet there was a difference: we created a space in which we collectively stayed present to the rage, anguish and yearnings expressed; we embraced them and moved on to the larger work of creating a field of many stories loosely knit that had been called forth from us all. When reflecting on what made this possible, it was clear that it began by enlisting everyone's engagement from the start, naming dreams and connecting to spirit...

The opening evening, wishes were articulated as if they were real; desires ranging from changing-the-world to making-it-through-the-day. In a very short time, with humor and poignancy, we discovered a lot about who we were. The next morning, a mixed-race Native American participant, Laurelyn Baker, invited us to welcome our ancestors in silence as, in

turn, we each held an evocative ritual staff. Many participants attributed their capacity to be present to the strong emotional expressions which shaped the depth and breadth of our collective story, to the power of this ritual. As a host, I let go of the schedule when the 30 minutes planned became two hours. Mark Jones then introduced HSL, an ethic of Hearing, Seeing and Loving as a framework for relating to each other. Many told us that this was essential to creating the quality of interaction present throughout the conference.

Beyond that, we ensured there were resources for music, movement, art, words and access to nature and to the sacred. We shaped an environment that allowed individuals and the collective to be receptive and active, being and doing, in many modes of human aliveness.

Then we opened the space, orienting people toward using the simple but potent practices of Open Space Technology to self-organize. A general pattern was established: gathering together in the morning, breaking into self-organized sessions throughout the day, a late afternoon reflection circle with evening activities following dinner. We ended our time together with a ritual of commitment, passing the staff once again, silently or openly speaking our own next step.

Lessons from the Story Field Conference

Through this embodied experience, a rich tapestry of learnings emerged, including:

- The existing story, while seemingly monolithic for the dominant culture, is in fact, many-storied and experienced radically differently based upon race, age, gender, sub-culture, class and life experience.
- How a story is told is as critical to its effectiveness as its content. Recognizing that all stories are incomplete encourages humility and curiosity about their deeper meanings.
- Stewarding the emergence of a healthy new stories includes:
 - recognizing them as a never ending story, unfolding through their living and telling;
 - developing a friendly relationship with dissonance and the unknown;
 - embracing the tensions inherent in duality so that our differences bring coherence and wholeness rather than conflict and division;
 - discovering the capacities to risk, to welcome diversity
 - co-operating because we know we are aspects of a larger whole with deep commonalities; and
 - engaging with emergent process, in which outcomes unfold on a path formed by walking it.

In the aftermath...

How does one measure the emergence of a new story field? The gathering affirmed the life energy of individuals to pursue their own passions; it sparked the synergy of new collaborations; it evoked the creative potential of breakthrough new endeavors; and tuned us all in to the invisible but palpable power of service to the whole.

The conference ended with this invocation:

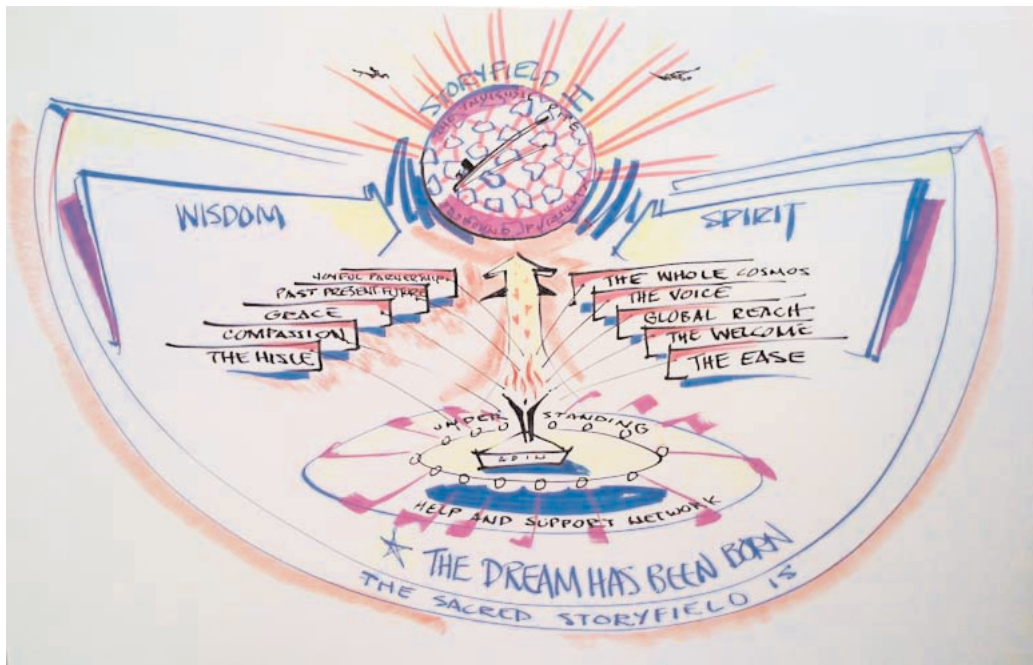
We are calling into being our collective soul so that our many-storied world can find its way.

To which we would now add

...and each and every one of us can inhabit the roles we are called to play.

Many people, including me, said they were changed by the experience. No matter where I

Graphic recorder, Jim Channon
 Photographer Gabriel Shirley, gabriel@bigmindconsulting.com



am, I find myself tuning in and speaking and acting based on seeing the situation through the eyes of others. It is as if many voices that used to be invisible to me are now constantly whispering, awakening me to a richer, more complex and diverse world.

As one participant, Janet Rae, put it:

I left my myopic vision of oneness at the Stupa and came home with an open heart for our environment, cultural diversity, and honoring art, music and expression over managing time.

While the fruits of this gathering continue to ripen, we know a variety of projects and partnerships are underway: a Euro-American videographer (for whom a new project^{iv} was born at the gathering) joined with an African-American teacher to engage her inner-city students in making their own vision videos; a mere three months after the gathering, 23 people reconvened for three days to deepen their connections with each other; and plans are already underway for the second annual Story Field Conference.

Every day I hear from someone who attended the gathering. I marvel at the unexpected connections and where they are leading. As we left, some were frustrated at the lack of clear answers to the questions asked in the invitation. Most left different because of their experience, trusting that life-serving articulations will emerge with time. An online space^v, hosted by volunteers who came together during the conference, is alive and well, capturing the thoughts of participants as they begin to take shape. I have no doubt that we opened the way for story workers to become more conscious of their power to shift our cultural story. The ripples will follow...^{vi}

Footnotes

i See The Power of Story, www.co-intelligence.org/I-powerofstory.html

ii www.storyfieldconference.net

iii For those unfamiliar with Open Space Technology, it is a practice that supports groups to self-organize to accomplish complex, meaningful intentions by inviting people to take responsibility for what they love as an act of service.

iv TelAVision, www.telavision.org

v <http://storyfieldteam.pbwiki.com>

vi For a report on the conference, visit <http://storyfieldteam.pbwiki.com/Story+Field+Conference+Report>.