

## Story

*The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms.* – Muriel Rukeyser

In the field of co-intelligence, stories are more than dramas that people tell or read. Story, as a pattern, is a powerful way to organize and share individual experiences and to explore and co-create shared realities. It forms one of the underlying structures of reality, comprehensible and responsive to those who possess what we call narrative intelligence. Our psyches and cultures are filled with narrative fields of influence, or story fields, that shape the consciousness and behavior of the individuals, organizations, and societies associated with them.

Thus, "story" encompasses the narrative structure of our internal and "real" lives, and the ways in which we live out the plots of those narratives. The co-intelligent approach to story focuses on discovering each other's deep humanity by listening to each other well – *and* on creating together the great stories of our past, present, and future in ways that are satisfying and generative for all of us.

### **THE SPECIAL MEANINGS OF “STORY” IN THE CO-INTELLIGENCE WORK**

For the purposes of co-intelligence work, I make a distinction between the word story and the word narrative; most dictionary definitions for both terms include words like account, statement, explanation. These refer to "stories told" – and while "stories told" is part of the co-intelligence story paradigm, there's another part that makes co-intelligence meaning-making around this topic different and particularly useful. Here, a story doesn't necessarily mean a story told or even believed.

A story can also be an actual event, a situation, a process, an unfolding of real events over time (including organisms and objects that are seen as processes embedded in larger processes!). And this sense of "story" is especially important to the idea of **STORY-REALITY** (which I'll discuss below). We're talking about REALITY. But there's a nuance here: Part of what's involved in this distinction is the role that stories – told and believed – play in *generating reality*, and the role that reality plays in *generating stories* – told and believed. There's a generative yin-yang sort of "two sides of the same coin" aspect that I find useful to capture with this one word, *story*.

So on the one hand we have "stories told (or believed)" and on the other hand we have "realities structured and understood as stories" – and we also have the dynamics between the two. So in co-intelligence work, I use the word "story" to encompass this whole set of meanings, while I use the word "narrative" to encompass just the story told or believed (and sometimes for analytical phrases like "narrative structure" or "narrative elements").

You'll probably get the hang of this as you explore the story paradigm...

## **THE POWER OF STORY – THE STORY PARADIGM**

### **Story-reality**

Story-reality is the reality we see when we recognize that every person, every being, every *thing* has a story and contains stories – and, in fact, *is* a story – and that all these stories are interconnected, that we are, in fact, surrounded by stories, embedded in stories, and made of stories. When the poet Muriel Rukeyser tells us that "the universe is made of stories, not atoms," she's describing story-reality. Ultimately, story-reality includes all actual events and realities, but experienced as stories, not as the usual patterns – objects and actions; matter, energy, space, time; patterns of probability; and so on. Story-reality consists of lived stories.

### **Lived stories**

Lived stories are those real, actual stories that are happening in the real world all around us all the time. The actual unfolding events related to any actual entity or subject constitute that entity's or subject's lived story. Everything that exists has, embodies, and participates in many lived stories. The way to co-intelligently engage in story-reality is to become sensitive to lived stories... to learn about the lived stories of people, places, things... to share our own lived stories... to discover how all these stories intersect, who or what is in the foreground and background of each other's lived stories. Ultimately, this provides the guidance we need to find our own most meaningful place in the universal story.

### **Narrative intelligence**

Narrative intelligence – or story-sensitivity – is the ability (or tendency) to perceive, know, think, feel, explain, and even design reality using stories and narrative elements. It can go beyond analytical approaches to tap deeply into the power of meaning, purpose and role. An example is the power of myths and archetypes; if you analyze them, you may actually miss why they are so powerful.

Narrative intelligence helps us comprehend things more effectively when they are presented in the form of a story. Conversely, we may struggle to comprehend ideas or information if they lack narrative elements such as unfolding events, settings, characters, conversations, challenges, and histories.

Narrative intelligence fosters curiosity about the stories behind people, things, and places. It helps you to infer the origins, histories, futures, and meanings of different actors and elements in what's happening.

However, this ability can easily lead us away from the truth: Those with narrative intelligence can often create (or believe) stories – real, plausible, or fantastical – to illustrate a point. On the other hand, it can also aid fact-finding investigations.

Maintaining a repertoire of stories, real or imaginary, is another hallmark of this intelligence. People with narrative intelligence have the ability to access and use such stories to effectively convey meaning. They excel at describing events with rich context and detail, often with relish. This ability extends to sequencing events and imagining chains of causation.

Narrative intelligence supports strategic thinking and planning, fostering the ability to create scenarios and anticipate possibilities. It thrives on a deep love of stories and an innate tendency to see people, places, and objects in the context of their role in unfolding events.

In addition, narrative intelligence allows individuals to resonate with the stories of others, facilitating understanding of diverse points of view. Similarly, this intelligence reveals thematic elements within life's events and helps identify significant relationships to help us "make sense" of things.

Narrative intelligence also enables individuals to construct stories from randomly selected elements and to use storytelling as a memory-enhancing tool. For example, it helps people remember phone numbers by converting digits into characters and weaving them into a memorable narrative.

In essence, narrative intelligence is the gateway to understanding the world through stories – real, imagined, and told – and finding deeper meaning in our experience.

## **Imagineering**

Imagineering is the practice of creating stories of what might be that actively and strategically enable the reader, listener, or viewer to enter the story and make it an aspect – or even the center – of their own lived story. An imagineering story is designed to become real in people's lives. It includes the characters, the compelling motivations, the contexts, the actions, and any necessary guidance to make it real. There are many examples, described on the co-intelligence websites. They can be powerful catalysts for social change.

## **Story fields**

Story fields are fields of influence or patterns of dynamic potential that permeate psycho-social space and affect the lives of those involved with them. They consist of many mutually reinforcing stories (myths, news, soap operas, lives, memories) and story-like phenomena

(roles, metaphors, archetypes, images). A story field paints a particular picture of how life is or should be and shapes the life within its reach into its image.

The American Way of Life is a powerful story field that includes everything from principles like liberty and the pursuit of happiness, to stories of cowboys and rags-to-riches heroes, to metaphors like the melting pot and the safety net, to images like the Statue of Liberty and the flag. It is communicated through movies, men in business suits, advertisements, college course offerings, career expectations, and mall displays – among many other things. It takes immense effort to resist or change it. Anyone or anything that doesn't live in this narrative sea and move with its currents doesn't seem very American.

Psychological, organizational, or social change is usually preceded or accompanied by a change in the story field that governs that system. It is therefore usually unproductive to try to change forms and habits without changing the story fields that hold them in place. Once the story field is changed, the subordinate patterns tend to realign themselves quickly. (This process is part of what is called *a paradigm shift*.)

Co-intelligent cultural transformation necessarily involves the co-generation of co-intelligent story fields. This would include examples of co-intelligence in action, imaginative visions of how things could be more co-intelligent, biographies of co-intelligent people, fiction illustrating the dynamics of co-intelligence, co-intelligent myths and poems, the reframing of numerous academic fields in terms of co-intelligence, people actually living co-intelligently, the clarification and use of special roles (such as elder and partner) associated with co-intelligence, etc. All aspects of this story paradigm are potent grist for this transformational mill.

## **STORY: A Story Epiphany**

For several months I'd been reflecting on the special power of stories to engage readers, listeners, viewers. So when I was riding a bus in Berkeley, my eyes were suddenly drawn to a sign above my head. Running along the joint between the wall and ceiling of the bus were advertisements, including public service announcements. Among these, Berkeley included occasional poems. The poem immediately across from me quoted poet Muriel Rukeyser: "The Universe is made of stories, not of atoms."

And suddenly, it was. Sitting on the bus, I was surrounded by stories masquerading as objects, like looking at a wall of the Grand Canyon and seeing not colored rocks, but the story of its layered creation. The people on the bus "had" stories so thoroughly that they had become that composite of their Personal Story, right there in present time, their wrinkled skin, the clothes they wore... The bus had stories so interwoven, so braided into its ongoing existence, that this very bus was a moving great story. And I realized that every molecule and atom in all those people

and objects around me – and in even me – had stories so long, deep, intertwined and ongoing that they were, in fact – in their essence – stories: where they had been and what they had done was their very essence.

It wasn't a matter of "we could tell a story about that." It was a matter of the story/stories actually being the structure of reality – being reality – and, yes, we could pick pieces out of that and "tell those stories", just like we could "paint a picture." But the stories were there, that specific aspect of reality was there and primary/primal, in its own right. It was an epiphany about story reality.

**COMMENTARY:** *Why and how that epiphany happened, I have no idea. But story reality became the foundation of "my" story paradigm that's described in the previous chapter. Deeply moved by that event, I went on to become enamored of the Great Story of Evolution (with Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow) – which led directly to my views on Conscious Evolution in Chapter 8 – and to co-create a week-long Story Field Conference in 2007 with more than 80 people attending. And Story became a fundamental pattern of the Wise Democracy Pattern Language described in Appendix D.*