Impactful storytelling in a time of ecological upheaval

Musings derived from a Theory of Change

By Carl Gough

Contents

Acknowledgements & thanks

Introduction

Beginnings - A creation story

I hope we can agree that the planet has reached a tipping point and what happens next will fundamentally depend upon what we as a species do (or do not do). An uncomfortable position isn't it, but if we fail to acknowledge the reality of the situation, we cheat ourselves and our children of the ability to do anything about it.

On a personal level, I believe that fear can prevent many of us from properly acknowledging where we have come to. The reality of the planetary breakdown can feel overwhelming; to face the full extent of the ecological crisis is to risk falling into a void filled with despair and with no hope of escape. At least that's what happened to me. But in that place, you also find hope. From the depth of grief you can begin to see patterns, complex connections and swinging pendulums of cause and effect that lead back to you and your place in the world. You are then faced with a choice: Do nothing or Do something? I've chosen to do 'Something.'

Covid gave us time to think and reflect and in the process I stumbled upon my 'Something,' a link between a community development tool and my storytelling. I began to apply this tool, called the theory of change to my storytelling and environmental issues. What began to emerge was quite exciting. Keen to see what others might think, I began to speak to other storytellers and 'Something' began to take shape.

What followed next was a series of discussions with a small group of people, exploring the subject of storytelling and how it may (or may not) be applied to support positive changes on environmental issues. Some of the questions proved rather uncomfortable, but from that discomfort arose some interesting insights. An ongoing process of reflection and research led me to build upon these until my brain got totally clogged up with too much information. To try and make sense of the muddled thoughts I began to scribble some notes down and was shocked when a few scribbled notes became this thing you're about to read!

I am certain that this is only a beginning and wonder if sharing these musings may be premature. Many of the thoughts contained here are still embryonic and there is much more work to be done. Yet despite some misgivings and insecurities, I also believe it's important to see what results from sharing this work. I do not purport to be an expert or to have easy answers. I do, however believe that we all have a diverse mix of experiences, skills and knowledge that can generate useful insights if they are shared - "Do nothing or do something." For me, doing nothing isn't an option and so instead, for better or worse, here is my 'Something.'

Impact & Change

Theory of Change is a community development tool I have frequently used to support discussions and explorations with charities and charitable organisations. The tool is powerful because it pushes people to be very specific about the change they hope to make and what

things will look like if they succeed in achieving that change. When I began to consider whether this tool had applications in driving environmental change through my storytelling, I discovered questions I'd never asked myself:

- *Are you seeking to use storytelling to support positive environmental changes?*
- *What is the change you are seeking to achieve?*
- *What is your current impact upon that change?*
- *Could you do better and if so, how?*

If you are a storyteller these questions may feel a bit uncomfortable. Part of the value in storytelling is its multi-faceted diversity and fluidity, so asking such blunt questions at times felt almost blasphemous. The practice of storytelling recognises that stories are a communal creation between teller and listener, the messages within a telling interpreted as much by the listener, as by the teller. There may be multiple intentions and motivations behind the action of sharing a story (some of which the teller may not even be aware of) and so storytellers get a touch uneasy when asked to state the impact of their storytelling. None the less, the process of questioning has helped to hold a mirror to the oral tradition, with implications that extend to sharing stories in other ways too.

There is plenty of latitude when it comes to defining impact, but the value of the questions is as much in the asking as in the responding. Spend some time with the question of impact and change, and you will begin to discover a very different and occasionally challenging way to view your storytelling.

Using this '*Something*'

The intended audience for this '*Something*' is anyone who wants to actively promote positive change on environmental issues using 'story' in all its wonderful and diverse forms.

Whilst my automatic bias is toward the oral tradition of storytelling, I leave the discourse regarding what is and isn't storytelling to those better placed to do so. Instead, what I offer here is some fertiliser for your thoughts, especially for those using storytelling as a vehicle for action on environmental issues.

I do want to be very clear that **this is not a guide on environmental storytelling!** I have no intention of telling you what to do. You will not find answers here, but you might find footholds that help begin your own explorations. As I say, treat this as fertiliser for your thoughts.

A single storyteller sharing a single story is not going to change the world. But together, with enough stories and enough voices, perhaps we can create a wind of change. If a Butterfly can create a hurricane, then maybe the right story, at the right time, in the right place, to the right person, might just be enough to start the butterfly effect.

The broad headings used in the next section were useful in trying to make sense of some very fluid thoughts and ideas and so are used to provide some form of structure. However, you will discover a strong overlap between some of the content and I encourage you to

further consider what opportunities this might create. You will instantly notice that some headings hold a single core idea, whereas others are more diffuse. I make no apology for this, it is a reflection of where some thoughts have been more rounded than others. You are likely to find some subjects resonate for you and others leave you cold. At this stage that is to be expected, but I have included the broad spectrum of brain fodder as it has occurred to me in anticipation that the content will evolve and change over time. So welcome to the wonderland that is my brain.

Take from these musings what you have use for and leave what you do not. If you'd like to share what you discover along the way, then I'd love to hear it.

The Musings

Words matter

From the start of the theory of change discussions, we struggled with how to describe what we were talking about. There was a shared distaste for terms like 'environmental storytelling' or even 'Nature', which only seemed to emphasise difference and separation. An integrated viewpoint felt necessary and the usual 'go to' terminology felt somewhat lacking. We awoke to the realisation that language has reinforced a human centred perspective and a value base that differs depending upon whether people are discussing the human world or the environment. An intellectual disconnect seems to exist that helps to numb us from our individual culpability. Language has been central to creating the divide between ourselves and our ecosystems (a subject we will come back to).

Robert MacFarlane's book 'The Lost Words' is a stark reminder of the potentially serious implications our choice of language has. The removal of words such as Acorn, Blackberry, Bluebell, Conker and Kingfisher, from the Oxford Junior Dictionary is alarming, raising questions of what happens when the next generation have no name for the things that are disappearing. We have an abundance of stories that show us the power of a name, so what happens when names begin to be forgotten?

Language has been used consciously or unconsciously to disconnect people, but it can also be used to reconnect and motivate certain actions. In 'The Good Ancestor' , Roman Krznaric reports on a study that showed a significant impact on legacy gifting (i.e. leaving a charity donation in your will) when language was used in a certain way. The study found that if a lawyer refrained from mentioning legacy gifting to a client, about 6% would voluntarily decide to leave a charitable donation in their will. However, if the Lawyer asked a client if they wanted to leave a charitable gift in their will, the percentage jumped to 12%. Furthermore, if the lawyer said, "many of our customers like to leave a gift to a charity in their will. Are there any charitable causes you are passionate about?" the percentage leaving a legacy gift jumped up to 17%. A choice of words can therefore significantly affect behaviour.

So what are the lessons for storytelling? The power of words is certainly no surprise, but could we possibly encourage behaviour change through careful choice of words? I'm no

psychologist, but clearly words and phrases are an important consideration when it comes to motivating (or demotivating) people to action. For example, Global Warming, Climate Change and Climate Disruption all relate to the same thing, but your emotional response to each of these may be very different. Similarly, the words and phrasing used within storytelling has potential to significantly shift emphasis and may benefit from more deliberate usage.

The example of legacy gifting and the use of language reminds me of 'Mimetic Desire' postulated by René Girard. Mimetic desire is the idea that our preferences and choices are not set but influenced by what we experience around us. Girard's theory directly draws upon the architypes of stories and how they influence our decision making, but this same influence extends into modern archetypes too i.e. copying celebrities we identify with or following social norms. Could a careful choice of words help frame certain behaviours within a story to trigger mimetic desire? Would such deliberate manipulation be considered unethical, or do we acknowledge that storytelling is an inherently subversive act?

Myths – reflections of past, present and future

Ouroboros – symbol of eternal cyclic renewal
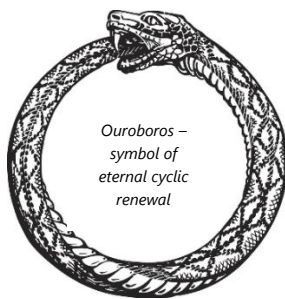
There was a deeper vein within the theory of change discussions that occasionally touched upon the role of myth, both in its broadest sense but also specific to their relevance on environmental issues. The temptation for some would be to dismiss them in favour of more modern viewpoints but look closer. You begin to discover universal truths in myth that have as much relevance to our present and future as they do to our past.

The challenges faced in myth offer strong parallels to the challenges we currently face. From cycles of death and rebirth to the lessons of the hero's journey, there are strong lessons and teachings that are as pertinent now as they were in ancient times. Eco philosopher Joanna Macy has spoken frequently regarding two concepts:

- 'The Great Unravelling' where humans wake up to the realities of the damaging and unsustainable industrial beast we have created as society and systems fall apart.
- 'The Great Turning' where we enter the third great age of humankind, moving with urgency away from the industrial growth society into a balanced and life-sustaining civilization.

I cannot think of two terms that better reflect the modern-day mythic quality of the threshold upon which we now stand; a bright new future within reach but necessitating a difficult journey, the outcome far from certain. All who accept such quests do so because they recognise there is no other choice! Sounds a bit familiar doesn't it?

By turning to myths, we can extend our understanding and find new doorways to lead us forward. Myths can give hope and empower, revealing what is required from each of us to reach the 'happy ever after' of the Great Turning.

Creation myths in particular seem to carry an energy that speaks directly to a deep part of our psyche. The close inter-relationship of birth, death and rebirth are common themes which offer plenty of applications here. Perhaps the appeal of such myths is the recognition that 'creation' is always dependent upon 'destruction', two sides of the same coin. Maybe, deep in our subconscious, we can recognise this pattern in our daily existence; where the grief and loss of the Great Unravelling is painful but essential in creating the conditions that give birth to the Great Turning?

Internal and external landscapes

Most stories have a strong connection to a specific location or place that is important to the story being told. In some cases the location is a physical, real world place (i.e. the external landscape), or else it occurs in another realm created specifically for that story, a place created in the imagination (i.e. the internal landscape).

Both landscapes have a role to play when it comes to considering the impact storytelling may have. Interestingly, even when a story is rooted in an external landscape, the experience of the story by an audience happens through the internal landscape. People absorb the details communicated through a story and layer them with their own experiences and cultural context to create an internal world where the story plays out. Where the external landscape of a story becomes internalised by the intended audience, a certain magic unfolds because the internal landscape is not limited by our physical reality. The internal landscape is where we can indulge our wilder selves; like the realm of Annwfn in the Mabinogion, here all things become possible.

It is worth remembering that whilst a story rooted in the external landscape is usually experienced internally, the reverse is also true. With care, the sense of wonder and magic cultivated internally by a story, can be drawn out into the physical world. When experiences from the internal landscape can be successfully transplanted into the external landscape, listeners may have a more profound experience, invoking emotions that will always connect them to that place. Emotional connection to something is usually associated with a caring mindset and so might offer a stepping stone toward cultivating more considerate behaviour or protective attitudes to the landscape of the story.

Emotions are powerful motivators and so here we find a place that as storytellers we might choose to spend time. To understand our own relationships in this external-internal landscape, exploring paths that may support more profound connection, awakening us and the stories we share, with the power of connection to the land.

From Connection to Non-Separation

The theory of change first identifies and then aids understanding of relationships between different things. On the subject of environment, one key enabler came into almost every conversation. No matter what ecological issue you consider, the reason we have (and

continue to undertake) such destructive behaviours is directly linked to the poor quality of relationship we have to the world around us.

No matter how it was phrased or in what context it emerged from, there seemed to be overall agreement that the environmental crises which have arisen stem from our loss of a full and deep connection to the world upon which we are so dependent. We have allowed a psychological separation of ourselves (and by association society) from the natural world. Whether conscious or unconscious, we are sidestepping issues of guilt and outrage that would ordinarily have guided us away from the current cliff edge.

Instead of a quality relationship to the things that genuinely sustain us, we have instead forged an unhealthy relationship to economic gain. When profit is all that matters, where modern day aspirations are focussed on 'growth', we break the world down into units of consumption and resource. This is possibly best demonstrated by my attendance at a webinar on world finance where I listened uncomfortably as the Capitalist regime refused to use words such as forests, mangroves, reedbeds and instead termed them all, 'Green Assets'!

Allow yourself to consider the things that get in the way of your connection to the natural world. Lending your conscious mind to this question may reveal a myriad of subtle ways we trick ourselves (and allow ourselves to be tricked) into believing Humans have stepped outside of natural laws. Consciously you will know such an idea is absurd and yet there it is, a way of thinking that puts human desires ahead of everything else.

In the theory of change discussions, we were united in our belief that reinstating a profound sense of connection is a vital step in addressing the core issues. The problem is that the word 'connection' has become overused and no longer communicates the true extent of what we are talking about. When we spoke of connection, we often referred to the deep recognition, respect, reverence and love for the complex interrelationships of the world, often found among indigenous cultures. The beliefs, the stories, the codes of conduct that underpin every action of first nation peoples show what can be achieved through meaningful 'connection'; being attuned to the more-than-human world and helping us refrain from destructive actions.

A different term was proposed by Malcolm Green - '*Non-separation*'. The moment Malcolm uttered this word it made total sense and more faithfully represented the deeper meaning of the conversations we'd been having. '*Seeking connection*' carries an active energy – It symbolises a drive to gain something that is absent, is almost desperate and demanding. In contrast, seeking '*Non-separation*' feels more passive yet more powerful because of that - it hints at a surrender, a stepping back to allow what is already there to flow into our lives.

- *'Non-separation'* reflects the healing that needs to occur in our relationships
- *'Non-separation'* hints at the removal of barriers (of all sorts)
- *'Non-separation'* even challenges the foundation of industrial society making concepts of ownership, property, possession and profit irrelevant

Try for yourself. Begin to consider what you do through a filter of seeking 'Non-separation' and you may begin to sense the shift inside. I began this journey from a position of grief, driven to do *'Something'*, but of course the 'Great Unravelling' we are experiencing is not a

uniquely 'Green' issue. Society itself is ill, we are not only separated from the land, but also from each other. The ideas which emerge from considering '*Non-separation*' are as applicable to our relationships with each other as they are to our relationships with the land. Heal one and you cannot help but heal the other. '*Non-separation*' is at the heart of our tradition as storytellers, from the stories we share to the audiences we share them with, so perhaps we're halfway there?

Unlocking Needs
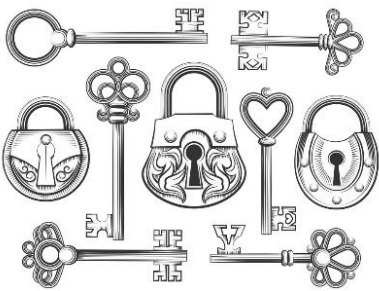
The theory of change asks questions that help identify, explore and understand needs. All action is driven by some form of need, so if we don't identify and understand needs, what are we doing?

Examining needs and why they exist can be a complex undertaking. Sometimes the first and most obvious way of meeting a need may not be the best option. There's a well known saying that illustrates this:

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day;

Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime

Of course, both the above fulfil a need, but one has a longer term ambition. Given the content here though, I feel compelled to add a third line to this saying:

Help a community learn to care for the waters as much as themselves and you feed them and the generations yet to come.

There are countless needs we could define here, but not every need is relevant to our purposes as storytellers. Part of the challenge here is recognising the needs we can respond to and those we cannot. As storytellers, the needs of our audience are a primary focus. Our needs in sharing a particular story become irrelevant if the telling does not fulfil the needs of the listener so we need to be careful.

There are some potentially sensitive issues here regarding socio-economic and cultural divisions. We have to wrestle with the question of who we are sharing stories with and why? Are the people we are telling stories to the ones who need to hear them? Much can be gained by leaving our comfort zones but it can be hard. Here we might find the ego trying to assert its own needs to keep us where we are, a safe, non-threatening, comfortable position. If we refocus needs through the lens of non-separation, we might find a way to step outside of ourselves and find new and more fertile ground for the stories we share.

I know from the discussions held so far that looking at storytelling as a needs driven activity can be controversial, but this is inescapable if developing a theory of change is going to be possible. Perhaps the heat of discussions regarding 'need' may yet clear the fog, enabling us to resolve what is and isn't possible.

Exploring needs raises questions including:

- Who are we trying to reach and why? Are we reaching out in the right way?
- What exactly are the needs of our audiences?
- Are audiences conscious or unconscious of their needs?
- Does storytelling help awaken a conscious recognition of their needs, or can it directly fulfil those needs?
- Are we sharing the right stories to the right audiences?
- Can we (or should we) be targeting particular audiences?
- Is need greater in urban or rural locations - does that even matter?
- Are people from more deprived backgrounds in greater need of hearing positive environmental messages?
- Do socio-economic factors create a barrier or an opportunity?

Perceptions:

Exploring the subject of storytelling and environment can feel like trying to grasp a live eel. At first you think you have it, but then it's gone, leaving you with just have a handful of slime. But practice makes perfect and with every attempt you learn something new.

In the process of grabbing this particular eel, the role of perception stands out very clearly for many different reasons. Perception is reality, but our perceived reality isn't real! I know, a head spinner isn't it. Our perception of reality is complex and flawed, the result of millennia of human evolution and fine-tuned by our lived experience. Everybody's lived experience is different and so everyone's perception of reality is also different.

The exciting thing here is that our perception is built upon story. Our brains receive a bewildering sensory input that is incoherent and chaotic and the only way our brains manage to make sense of everything is to use stories. In this way we really are, 'the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves.'

Trying to understand perception can get quite overwhelming, but if you want a 5-minute crash course on how it works and why it's important, then have a look at this short video from The Future of Storytelling.

Without question, perception is key to everything when it comes to storytelling and influence. However, there are four subjects that seem to stand out and offer useful insights when it comes to the role of storytelling and the environment. These are:

- Perceptions around ecology
- Perceptions of time
- Perceptions of what will be lost or gained
- Perceptions between local and global

Let's consider these in more detail.

1. The Other – putting people back into ecology

Perception sits at the heart of what we have already considered in the section about non-separation. The perception that we are separate and unaffected from natural laws sits at the heart of what has allowed our society to develop its human centric and short-sighted decision making.

At times it feels like Industrialisation helped create a perception that we have outgrown evolution. We revel in our supreme achievements whilst everything else is regarded as 'Other' and pushed aside to make way for the rise Homo sapiens. I'm glad to say that in recent years it feels like perceptions have shifted, but we still have a hangover of perceptions that we are struggling to process.

There is an acknowledgment that sweeping things under the carpet is no longer acceptable and that has slowly begun to alter perceptions. We are waking up to the shame and damage of colonialism and the slave trade. Could a similar shift of perception expand to recognise what we have done to 'The Other' as well?

There are strong parallels in our perception of the natural world that resonate with the days of Empire, where some peoples were swept aside and perceived of lesser value, not equal. If we are now able to start showing humility and apologise for the mistakes of colonialism, then can we recognise that colonisation and subjugation of the natural world isn't so very different? Of course, to do this requires acknowledging grief and guilt first, but then moving beyond that to enable healing.
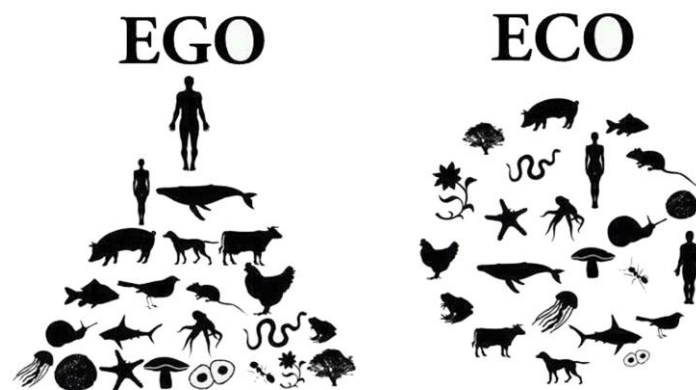
The current perceptions of our planetary system have put Man at the top of a pyramid, making 'The Other' of less importance. Such misguided viewpoints underpin our value base which leads to flawed decision making, creating the environmental issues we face today. If we can shift perception into an Eco-centric viewpoint we might begin to get somewhere. The Eco-centric perspective puts the human role back into the ecosystems we have so desperately tried to remove ourselves from. Eco-centricity places equal value on every component of an ecosystem because they are part of a whole; hurt one and you hurt all.

A large part of the theory of change discussions explored this concept of 'The Other' and how stories might support a shift in perception. Lisa Schneidau introduced the idea of rewilding stories, emphasising the non-human aspects within a story and/or sharing stories from other-then-human perspectives. Rewilding is certainly useful because it can be applied

to any story in any number of ways to draw out 'The Other', emphasising aspects that might easily be overlooked. The meaning and symbolism in some stories can shift dramatically in using this kind of approach.

We are in essence looking to apply the ideas of [Deep Ecology](#) to our storytelling and help cultivate recognition that human existence is not separate from 'The Other', but integral to it. Drawing upon language, myth, and jumping between internal and external landscapes we can use stories to move toward non-separation.

2. *Time – the great mind altering substance*

Time is a great way of looking at how perceptions are affected by context. We can all draw upon personal experiences here; you have certainly noticed how the years feel like they fly by as you get older and conversely how an hour can last forever when you're bored or not enjoying yourself. Time is great at illustrating the fluidity of perception but can also be used to deliberately alter perception.

The human perception of time is based on our own experience i.e. our own lifetime. But when we begin to consider time as something that extends beyond our own lifetime, something curious begins to happen. Perhaps you've experienced that strange 'out of time' sensation when exploring your family tree or been viewing the fossils at a natural history museum. We are gifted with a brain that is able to time travel, not only into the past but also into the future and when we do so, it seems to trigger an automatic shift in perception. When we consider the full extent of time beyond our own lifetime, the immediacy and importance of our own lives begins to fade and we move toward a more encompassing world view. We lose our self-importance and begin to feel part of something much grander and this mind set has potential to be a powerful ally in shifting perceptions.

In '[The Good Ancestor](#)', Roman Krznaric advocates the cultivation of long-term generational thinking as an essential development for achieving positive change and how our perception of time is key to achieving this. Krznaric refers to our natural ability to think in two ways:

- The Marshmallow Brain - short-term thinking that has its origins in our evolutionary past. Responsive to immediate threats and immediate rewards. The term is derived from the overwhelming impulse a child faces to eat a marshmallow placed in front of them, even though they are told they can have two if they wait five minutes.
- The Acorn Brain - longer term thinking that prompts actions in the now for rewards later on. The acorn brain is often altruistic, taking gratification from the fact that actions taken now may not achieve the desired outcome within our own lifetime. The term is derived from the idea of planting an acorn to grow a tree, even though we know the tree will not mature within our own lifetime.

Perception of time is an important influence upon whether Marshmallow thinking or Acorn thinking is dominant. When a society steps into Acorn thinking and adopts principles like 7th Generation thinking or Cathedral thinking, we begin to make decisions that measure consequences far beyond ourselves. Acorn thinking requires a different perception of time, creating a buffer that minimises the white noise of the present to enable the rational mind to

engage, consider and perceive patterns. Unfortunately, the Acorn brain is of little use to the modern capitalist economy because it is exceptionally resistant to impulsive decisions. The short-term Marshmallow brain however is the ideal companion for consumerism and by association profit. Nothing kicks the Marshmallow brain into action like scarcity or the 'fear of missing out.' Look at the advertising, messaging and stories we are all subjected to each day and it is hard to ignore the hyped-up nature of sensationalist media that emphasises threats and scarcity, creating anxiety that fuels the Marshmallow brain, keeping our attention on short term gain. Marshmallow thinking is the 'buy now, think later' mentality that lies at the heart of the environmental crises we currently face.

Compared to the instinctive Marshmallow brain, the Acorn brain appears to require a conscious effort. Although not difficult, the Acorn brain does require the door to be held open and perhaps this is where storytelling can help. When people are encouraged to shift their perception of time, the Acorn brain readily steps forward and there are multiple ways that stories affect our perception of time:

- Perceptions of time always shift when you tell or listen to a story.
- Traditional stories, folktales, legends and myth have been passed to us through time, a literal example of generational thought.
- The content of stories can themselves be used to expand time horizons, leaping centuries in the telling, extoling the virtues of generational thinking, or building archetypes we might aspire to be like.

There are potentially many ways that deep time can be brought into a storytelling, nourishing the acorn brain to make it stronger, a counterbalance for our consumerist economy.

3. *Loss or Gain?*

Perceptions are like a door that can be opened or closed; give access to somewhere new, or lock us out. When I say this, I'm referring to the fact that most of the narratives around environmental issues often come from a negative viewpoint, helping create perceptions that act as a barrier to meaningful action.

I would wager that most people perceive environmental improvements as meaning they have to give up something. The default position seems to be listing the things people will have stop doing, or give up, rather than looking at what we would gain. The environmental cause is surrounded by the need for self-sacrifice, creating a perception that any positive environmental action requires giving up time, spending more money, less convenience, more effort etc. – in short, its perceived as a threat to the modern way of living. This is far from useful in encouraging the level of change that is required.

To further compound the problem, we seem to hold some sado-masochistic fetish for visions of the future that embody a tortured, dystopian and apocalyptic world. There is certainly little to encourage an optimistic view of the longer-term future. The current narrative seems intent on reinforcing a perception that we're doomed and even worse, may be contributing

to [learned hopelessness](#) in our children. Such stories feed a culture of insecurity, fostering a mentality of 'get it while you can,' playing directly into the hands of our marshmallow brains.

Consider what might happen if we created a comparable and equally detailed vision of what could be gained from taking positive environmental action? If I asked you to tell me how you view the world in 50 or 100 years, what do you see? Is your vision optimistic or pessimistic? When I asked myself this question, I was shocked to realise I had lost my belief in the future! I don't know how it happened but somehow, my once vibrant and optimistic view had been lost under a slow, creeping shroud of despair. As a storyteller, you must ask yourself some serious questions when you realise that is your world view! For me, this is where the idea of the Great Turning (see section on myths) has proved invaluable. The Great Turning creates an aspiration, a vision of a future driven from the difficulties of the present. It helps give relevance to individual and collective action and reignites hope.

Stories like Jean Giono's '[The man who planted trees](#),' offer a counter narrative that seeks to emphasise what we have to gain, but there is a lot of ground to make up in this regard. We desperately need more stories that cultivate and prioritise what we have to gain in order to cultivate optimism, which in turn can support action. Put it this way, if the voting population don't believe in (or want) a sustainable future, then governments certainly won't prioritise it.

I'm certain there is a tipping point where the push toward change becomes a pull toward change. Stories are a spark, a place to begin shifting perceptions, creating a ripple effect, a positive feedback loop where people share increasingly positive viewpoints. Can the door of perception be unlocked so we can move to where we need to be? With increasing evidence and real world examples of positive change being shared (through stories of course), principals around mimetic desire might help convert the push for change, into a pull.

4. *Local verses global*

When I worked as a National Park warden, the motto was 'Think Global, Act Local'. I know it has fallen out of favour and it certainly isn't a new idea, but for me at least it remains an important component when we talk about perceptions. In ['Courting the Wild Twin'](#), Martin Shaw says, "We rarely fight for an abstraction, not necessarily even our country; we fight for our regiment, or the village or the home."

Hearing about jungles being ripped out for palm oil plantations, or coral reefs bleaching, Polar Bears starving etc, is certainly distressing but unless you live in, or have a direct link to such places, they feel abstract, disconnected from you and so it is hard to take meaningful action. However, when something happens on your own doorstep, you're far more likely to become very active, engaged and vocal because you have a very tangible connection to the situation.

Now take this idea and apply it to your storytelling. Do audiences respond differently to a story shared from a culture on the other side of the world, compared to one drawn from the landscape in which they live? Sharing local stories helps people orientate themselves, develop a stronger attachment that is more likely to encourage emotional response. For people to act, they need to care and to care they need to be aware of the things that they

are connected to. If you know the connection you have to something, you are then empowered by the choice, '*do nothing or do something?*' How better to help people care than using stories, tales that support development of new relationships, cultivating non-separation with the place they call home?

Bookends of influence

The theory of change considers far more than what happens as a result of a particular action. There are many factors that can influence an outcome, some we might have control over and others we do not. Where we do have control, we can potentially create an enhanced outcome for a particular action. For example, the core action for an athlete is physical training in order to try and win a race, but sometimes winning comes down to more than the act of running e.g. type of running shoes, diet, acclimatisation to a different climate etc.

Storytellers are already aware of how different influences create different outcomes because we share the same stories many times, but they are never the same twice. Many things alter a story – telling outdoors compared to indoors, day compared to night, adult audiences, mixed audiences or child only, school classroom compared to pub and so on.

If we consider the influences outside of the story itself, we find some interesting avenues to explore. We can look at other factors that might enhance or detract from our purposes in storytelling. Perhaps we can introduce things before or after a storytelling, taking a much more holistic viewpoint about what we do and why. It might even be possible to create circumstances before or after a storytelling that frame the experience in favour of a particular outcome, what I've come to call the 'Bookends of Influence.'

This idea is probably best illustrated through a theoretical example:

> *Community action is a powerful way to achieve meaningful changes on environmental issues, however getting people to volunteer can be difficult. The perception of volunteering is varied and there are many barriers people put in the way of getting involved. They may have perceptions that community projects are poorly organised, or they don't have enough time, or they'll get stuck doing something they don't want to, etc.*
>
> *Imagine there is an idea to create a local nature reserve, but it needs volunteers and wider community support. A fun day is organised that will include some storytelling, but in this example there is no need to emphasise anything about the project in the advertising. It can be publicised as just a fun family day out to maximise appeal and have a good turn out.*
>
> *The storytelling sessions at the event share stories that reveal what can happen when a community comes together (e.g. stone soup). Ideally the stories include themes around initial reluctance, but then revealing the great things possible when everyone comes together to help.*
>
> *For the duration of the story, the audience is caught up in the unfolding drama, relating to the initial reluctance in the community but then willing everyone to come together and succeed. The audience gets the endorphin rush when everyone comes together in the story and for a few short moments they are inspired by the power of community to overcome. The usual barriers*

and cynicism a person might have toward volunteering are brushed aside through the power of story.

Here the bookend of influence comes at the end. Once the storytelling is over, a volunteering sign up sheet is put out at the door where people leave and they are informed about the community project and the call for volunteers willing to lend a hand.

Would the experience of the story motivate more people to sign up as a volunteer?

I don't know the answer to this question, but this is a testable hypothesis and I hope to experiment with it in future. The 'Bookends of Influence' offer a very practical and adaptable way of exploring how storytelling can be used in a wider context for a particular purpose.

A slight *Caveat* here – be wary of turning Preacher! When you are passionate about something, you might easily find yourself losing your footing as a storyteller and tipping into the evangelical world of Preacher. The perils of slipping into a preaching mindset came up a few times in the theory of change discussions and for good reason. Make no mistake, storytelling and preaching are different things and you could quickly lose an audience if you blur these boundaries. In the example of the community event above, the bookend at the conclusion of the storytelling is gentle, trusting in the power of the story to convince. The audience are left to decide for themselves if they are interested or not. Compare this to an approach where at the end of the storytelling the audience are then assaulted by a further 5-10minutes of someone talking about the worthiness of the community project in an attempt to convince people to sign up. The magic created in the storytelling would be shattered by such an approach and I'm certain people would start edging toward the door, desperate for escape. So be careful and go gently if you decide to try this approach. Always leave space for personal choice and individual interpretation.

Motivation

'Silent Spring' was published by Rachel Carson in 1962 and triggered broad sweeping changes across the globe in response to the dangers it highlighted. In the 1980's aerosol propellants known as CFCs were opening a hole in the Ozone layer and countries across the globe began to respond, quickly phasing out the use of CFCs. So why don't we see equivalent responses to the ecological threats we face today? The answer is complex and I'm certainly not going to achieve much in trying to answer that here - even if I could. So instead, let's consider something that we can understand – Motivation!

There are many reasons put forward to explain our psychological and political disconnect from environmental issues, but much of it relates to things that affect our motivation. There is a wonderful keynote address by George Marshall delivered at the GEECS symposium on Storytelling and the Environment that encapsulates some of these challenges and is well worth viewing if you have an hour to spare.

When it comes to story, there seems to be an endless stream of reporting on what is happening to the planet, so I'd suggest lack of awareness isn't the issue, but excessive awareness is. Motivation relies on feeling empowered to be able to make a difference. The

avalanche of sensationalist media is almost hysterical with images and language that does nothing but fuel hopelessness. Do a quick google search and you will quickly find a growing evidence base that shows how environmental stories focussing upon loss and devastation (often told to raise awareness), actually disengage, disempower and fuel apathy. As storytellers, we have a role to play as pathfinders. The importance of sharing positive, solution focussed stories needs to be a core consideration.

Another key aspect that has arisen from discussions around a theory of change is love. We've already talked about the importance of non-separation, but love is a vital part of that relationship. Here, the love we are referring to is not romantic love or even necessarily the kind of love expressed when asked what your favourite animal is. Love has many forms but in its purest form, is open, is accepting, finds beauty in the most unlikely things. Stories are vital in this regard because finding love requires recognition and understanding. Let me put it this way, do you love soil? Right now, possibly not, but go on a journey where you can discover soil's multiple worlds from macro to micro, listen to stories that help shift your perception and perhaps you may discover interest, fascination, appreciation and respect for something you once thought of as just dirt. Most gardeners love soil because they know what it represents. The challenge may be how we as storytellers can find ways to open such doors for others to walk through and discover what motivates them.

The Spiritual dimension

These musings would not be complete without inclusion and consideration of the spiritual dimension inherent within this subject. I do this cautiously knowing that for some it triggers a stereotype that is unhelpful. Perhaps personal development might be a more practical term, but our relationship with the other-than-human world is not entirely a practical one. The wild places gave rise to Mysticism, Paganism, Druidry or any number of other belief systems. Whilst it is tempting to unpack those further, let us at least recognise that there is a connection we have to the more-than-human world that goes beyond logic or pragmatism. We have a great deal to learn from indigenous people in this respect, whose traditions and culture are intrinsically bound to the environment within which they live, revealing and respecting the life affirming relationships between human and non-human worlds.

When you begin to consider the spiritual side, counter arguments often emerge cautioning against anthropomorphic attitudes and judgements. I come from a biological background and so I'm keenly aware of the cultural expectation of the scientific community in that regard, but I have also begun to question it. Where is the line? Where does applying human values to the non-human world create problems and where might it deepen our appreciation of 'The Other?' Robin Wall Kimmerer dances beautifully between being Botanist and Potawatomi in her book 'Braiding Sweetgrass,' showing how science and native traditions both describe the same things, they just speak in different languages. Bringing the two together, enhances both.

Stories occupy an essential role with indigenous people, helping reinforce culture, traditions and beliefs, whilst ensuring ancestral knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. The knowledge carried in such stories guides and affirms acceptable actions that embody

16

ideas of eco-centric thinking. I am not advocating cultural appropriation of such stories, but I do think they offer a template for how storytelling can connect people to their land in profound ways, encouraging balance and harmony. I have heard on more than one occasion that we need a new myth for the current age, so perhaps this might be a place to start?

No matter where you live, there is a way to relate to the land, to find a deeper sense of connection. Finding the doorways to such places can be hard to begin with, but stories can help discover the spirit within a landscape, a tree, a flower, a bug or even a rock. Whatever your own thoughts, spiritual traditions are bound up within stories and many traditional tales hold secrets that call to us. As Martin Shaw explores in '[Courting the Wild Twin,](#)' Stories not only offer gateways that can shift perception and aid non-separation, but they can also become tools that build resilience. Traditional stories maintain the path, leaving the way open for others to follow.

The inner child

Beyond the Border hosted some great online discussions during 2020. During one session on the environment, someone said, "Wouldn't it be great if the determination and optimism we have as children could be kept when we become adults."

I wish I could recall the name of the person who said this as it was a powerful observation. I have certainly experienced the tarnishing of my ideals with age, or is that simply the emergence of wisdom through age and the loss naivety? (Personally, I don't feel very wise and am still incredibly naïve at times, so I'm sticking with my former interpretation.) What might we be capable of if we could rejuvenate the energy and ideals we held as children (or even help the current generation maintain their ideals and aspirations into adulthood)?

I keep feeling story may have a role here as well, but so far it remains little more than a feeling. When I listen to a story I am reminded of the safety and comfort I felt being told stories as a child. We all have an inner child they say and there are ways to connect and listen to that child through certain meditative practices. Can stories also connect to that inner child? If the joy of stories is partly derived from a regression to feelings from our childhood, could they help recapture the spirit of idealism and optimism we once held? I'll be honest, this one feels a bit of a stretch and I have nothing to offer that gives substance to such a flimsy notion. I share this on the chance it may take root and grow in the mind of someone better able to propagate it.

Choice of stories

I do understand the desire for lists of stories to use in certain situations, but I don't personally feel this approach offers much substance. To me, if feels empty and hollow using stories this way, the equivalent of taking pain killers for a stress headache – if you don't pay attention to the cause of stress, that pill is only going to take the edge off, nothing more!

Don't get me wrong, this approach has its place if we're exploring new repertoire, but there also seems to be an element of the Marshmallow brain here, asserting its desire for a quick fix. The Marshmallow brain is driven by fear, is reactionary to threats and is ready to throw a tantrum if it doesn't get what it wants. The Marshmallow brain demands instant relief from discomfort, so an 'off the shelf remedy' suits it just fine.

Using the theory of change has helped uncover much deeper considerations that can be applied to almost any story. I have certainly begun to view my existing repertoire in an entirely different way. The malaise of planet Earth is complex and multi-dimensional, but ultimately comes down to failings in the human condition and here, every story has potential to be an environmental story! What story ever told doesn't have reference to the human condition in one form or another? If nothing else, I hope these musings help you recognise that overt environmental content in a story isn't necessary for supporting positive change.

The theory of change discussions never once highlighted a need for us to preach about environmental problems or even to educate our audiences (although doing your homework and getting your facts straight is still a good idea). The underlying issues that come up again and again are about connection, a deep, meaningful and transformative re-awakening that will never be achieved in sharing a single story, or a story about a particular thing. Instead we sink deeper, needing to draw upon forgotten ancestral roots that have been passed to us in the disguise of story.

What now?

When this '*Something*' came into being, it was intended as a brain dump to help me think a bit more clearly. I didn't anticipate creating something as long as this, or indeed sharing it openly, but still here it is. If you've got this far then I'm certain you have any number of additional questions, queries and considerations of your own. As I said, this is only a beginning, the tip of the iceberg. There is one thing that continues to be evasive in all this; how to create a complete and coherent theory of change, adaptable and flexible enough to accommodate the breadth of views in the storytelling community. However, we might be getting closer.

'THE TWO MULES'
A fable for the Nations

CO-OPERATION
IS BETTER THAN CONFLICT
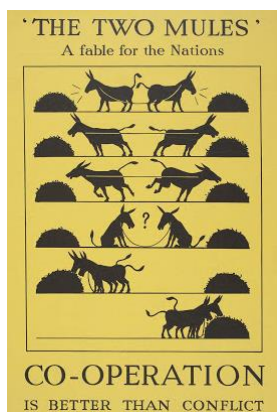
Why do we need a theory of change?
We storytellers are an individualistic bunch, no question about it. We are all off doing our own things, free to do what we want, fulfilling whatever needs we (or the people booking us) decide. Encapsulating such widely diverging viewpoints in a single theory of change was never going to be easy (or even certain of success). I could of course create a theory of change just for my own storytelling, it would certainly have been easier, but what would be the point?

We are back to the question of impact. A global problem needs a global solution and so meaningful impact has to go beyond the

individual. The challenge is in finding a way for more people to be pulling in (more or less) the same direction. A theory of change has potential to help, but requires a concept of impact that is broad enough for people to subscribe to it. Can't be done I hear you say? Well, maybe, but I'm not prepared to give up yet.

If I told 100 people to meet me at a specific location, would everyone take the same route? Of course not! Some would go by car, some by train or bus. They would not all take the same car, train or bus, or even follow the same roads. If we take the same approach in creating a theory of change, we can still define an impact so long as we keep it broad enough to just indicate a general direction of travel. From that point, people can decide for themselves the route they want to take.

Moving forward

The process of writing this 'Something,' has done what was required - it helped to clear my head. From a muddled confusion of ideas, I can now see a way forward. I wasn't certain at the start, but now I believe we have a foothold from where we can begin creating an over-arching theory of change. There will however be much more work to refine these ideas before it will be ready to share openly (watch this space).

After establishing a broad theory of change, I believe we might then be able to create some issue specific versions (i.e. as global warming, land use changes, biodiversity etc) for those who want to take a more specialised approach.

A huge advantage to the theory of change is that it lends itself to being tested. Pilot projects can put the ideas into practice, assessing what does and doesn't hold true; continually modifying and improving the theory.

Whilst this has been a personal account of the journey so far, I want to be clear that I do not travel alone! I am indebted and exceptionally grateful to those who responded to the initial call I put out in September 2020 – The views and input of everyone listed in the acknowledgements have helped build substance to what is shared here.

There is still a great deal to be considered and as the work expands outwards there will be even more opportunities for others to get involved. This is a huge undertaking that can't be accomplished alone and so if you would like to be involved in the future, or just keep up to date with what happens next, please join the mailing list

We also have a Facebook Group set up if you'd like to join the conversation.

If this 'Something' has triggered ideas or thoughts of your own, then I encourage you to share them. Plant enough seeds and you might be surprised what grows.