

# Impactful storytelling in a time of ecological upheaval

By Carl Gough

## A SUMMARY

People are now mostly aware that the planet is in breakdown, but we seem paralysed by the scale of the issue. How can an individual person make a difference? Well personally, it came down to a simple choice – ‘Do nothing or Do Something.’

*‘Impactful storytelling in a time of ecological upheaval’* is my *‘Something,’* a first step resulting from a series of discussions among storytellers. We sought to consider what might matter most when a storyteller feels the call; hears the whisper that compels us to apply storytelling in more purposeful and impactful ways. To become activist for people and planet.

To give structure and focus to the discussions, we utilised a community development tool called the theory of change. The insights that emerged provided thoughts, ideas, considerations, and observations that guided further research and exploration, culminating in what I have come to refer to as my musings. The notes are no more than a foothold, a simple lens through which anyone using stories can focus their own intentions, develop their own approach. The themes presented are not a set of instructions, they give no easy answers, they are simply fertiliser for your own thoughts, a ‘pick & mix’ you can work with to suit your own preferences.

The full document provides more detailed exploration of the following points:



### WORDS MATTER

There is power in a name! Careful and deliberate use of words can have a significant influence upon how a story or message is received. Words can inflame, motivate, soothe, or calm. Conscious use is important.



### MYTHS – REFLECTIONS OF PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE


To dismiss myths as irrelevant to the challenges of the future is misguided. The archetypes and hidden meanings in myth offer a route map, reminding us of innate human failings and how they can be overcome.



### INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL LANDSCAPES

The way we experience stories offers some useful tools that can bridge the gulf between our external and internal worlds. As storytellers, we can play between different realms and change how people might relate to a landscape.



A person stands on a sand dune at night, holding a glowing object that projects a beam of light onto the sand. The background is a dark, starry sky.

## FROM CONNECTION TO NON-SEPARATION

Our collective disregard for the planet has been directly enabled by the loss of connection to the natural world. Restoring this relationship is vital in beginning to address the problems we face. Connection is clearly needed, however approaching this issue from a position of seeking 'non-separation' may offer more appropriate and potentially more impactful solutions.

## UNLOCKING NEEDS

If we do not understand the need for something then why are we doing it? Exploring needs is hugely complex but recognising that a specific need can be fulfilled in multiple ways is essential. For any identified need, we should consciously consider and select what our approach will be and why.

## PERCEPTIONS

Humans are wired in a peculiar fashion and this leads every single person to invent their own reality; every person's perception is unique. Stories sit at the heart of how our perceptions are created and so storytelling offers a powerful tool in remolding perceptions. Four key perceptions are explored to see how storytellers might influence them.

- ▣ **The Other** – We can approach stories in ways that help put humans back into ecology. We need to perceive ourselves as part of the same entity; hurt one and you hurt all.
- ▣ **Time** – Stories have an ability to change our perception of time, creating a doorway toward generational and longer-term thinking as a vital step toward more conscious action.
- ▣ **Loss or Gain?** – We need to counter the current narratives that focus on loss when it comes to taking positive environmental action. We ideally need more stories that celebrate what will be gained.
- ▣ **Local verses global** – Thinking globally is exhausting and largely responsible for the mainstream apathy that exists. Stories drawn from a more local context might help people feel more able to make a difference.

## BOOKENDS OF INFLUENCE

The potential influence and impact of a storytelling event is not just in the telling. Consideration and deliberate staging of things before and after a storytelling event offers huge opportunity to enhance messaging, or motivate action.



A person is walking away from the viewer on a vast, undulating sand dune under a twilight sky. The dunes are bathed in the warm, orange and yellow light of a setting or rising sun, creating long, soft shadows. The person is a small figure in the distance, wearing dark clothing. The overall mood is contemplative and expansive.

## **MOTIVATION**

Awareness is not the problem anymore, but motivation is. Understanding what motivates different audiences is important if storytelling can translate into action in the real world.

## **THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION**

Many indigenous cultures have belief systems that reinforce actions which preserve the environment upon which they are dependent. Stories help affirm cultural norms, ethics, and values. There is much to be learned here about the applied use of stories for promoting (or preventing) certain actions.

## **THE INNER CHILD**

Many adults recognise that as they get older, the ideals and optimism of their youth tend to diminish. Could stories help rejuvenate the exuberance of our younger selves, or protect the young of today from becoming the apathetic adults of tomorrow?

## **CHOICE OF STORIES**

Creating a prescriptive list of suitable stories is the equivalent of popping a pill for a stress headache. If you don't address the stress, the headache is going to come back! Impactful storytelling requires a deeper understanding; time to reflect and consider. When you do so, every story reveals its potential to deliver an environmental message.

The full document is freely available as a pdf, but represents the smallest of beginnings, a playful dance at the edge of an immense and ancient forest. To go deeper, to explore further, will take time, patience and understanding. I am certain the terrain will get challenging at times, but with guides and trusted companionship, I believe it's worth the effort. I have doubts of course, but every time they arise, a little voice whispers ... *'Do nothing or Do something.'*

The sharing of these emerging and at times half formed ideas, is intended to signify a commitment to the journey ahead; a trail of breadcrumbs so that others might find us. The more we explore, the more we find, and the greater the need for more help to fully explore the paths that continue to be revealed.

If you wish to follow our progress or even join in the search, then please do get in touch.