APPENDIX SEVEN
Telling Your Public Story: Self, Us, Now

By Marshall Ganz

Stories not only teach us how to act—they inspire us to act. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we feel—our hopes, our cares, our obligations—not simply what we know that can inspire us with the courage to act.

A plot is structured with:

- a beginning,
- movement toward a desired goal,
- an unexpected event,
- a crisis that engages our curiosity,
- choices made in response to the crisis,
- and an outcome.

Our ability to empathetically identify with a protagonist allows us to enter into the story, feel what s/he feels, see things through his or her eyes. And the moral, revealed through the resolution, brings understanding. From stories, we learn how to manage ourselves, how to face difficult choices, unfamiliar situations, and uncertain outcomes because each of us is the protagonist in our own life story, facing everyday challenges, authoring our own choices, and learning from the outcomes.

By telling our personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes we can inspire others and share our own wisdom about how they can face their challenges as well. Because we can express our values through stories not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.

Stories are specific—they evoke a very particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, texture, taste. The better able to communicate this specificity, the more power your story will have to engage others. This may seem like a paradox, but like a poem or a painting or a piece of music, it is the specificity of the experience that can give us access to the universal sentiment or insight they contain.

You may think that your story doesn’t matter, that people aren’t interested, that you shouldn’t be talking about yourself. But when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead. The thing about it is that if you don’t author your public story, others will, and they may not tell it in the way that you like—as many recent examples show.

A good public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the “plot” of your life—the challenges you have faced, choices you made, and outcomes you experienced.

**Challenge:** Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it your challenge?

**Choice:** Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage—or not? Where did you get the hope—or not? How did it feel?

**Outcome:** How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel?

The story you tell of how you came to serve as a leader offers others insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, what they can learn from you, and what you might expect of them as well.

A public story consists of three parts:
• **A Story of Self**: how you came to be the person you are.

• **A Story of Us**: how your constituency, community, organization, came to be the people they are; and

• **A Story of Now**: the challenge this community now faces, the choices it must make and the outcomes to which “we” can aspire.

In this worksheet, we focus primarily on the “story of self,” the place to begin, but we also offer some suggestions on getting to a story of us and a story of now. Remember the art of storytelling is in the telling, not in the writing. In other words, storytelling is interactive, a form of social transaction, and can therefore only be learned by telling, and listening, and telling and listening.

**Story of Self**

Take time to reflect on your own public story, beginning with your story of self. Grab a notebook, a tape (or digital) recorder, or a friend who will listen, and describe the milestones and experiences that have brought you to this moment. Go back as far as you can remember. Focus on challenges you had to face, the choices you made about how to deal with them, and the satisfactions—or frustrations—you experienced. What did you learn from the outcomes and how you feel about them today? What did they teach you about yourself, about your family, about your peers, about your community, about your nation, about the world around you, about people—about what really matters to you? What about these stories was so intriguing? Which elements offered real perspective into your own life.

If you’re having trouble, here are some questions to get you started. These questions are NOT meant to be answered individually. They are intended to help to inspire you and get your memory gears rolling so you can reflect on your public story and tell it with brevity and intentionality. Don’t expect to include the answers to all these questions each time you tell your story. They are the building blocks of many potential stories, and the object right now is to lay them out in a row and see what inspires you.

What memories do you have as a child that link to the people, places, events that you value? What are your favorite memories? What images, sounds or smells in particular come up for you when you recall these memories?

List every job or project that you have ever been involved with connected with these values, or not. Be expansive; include things like camping in the wild, serving in a youth group, going to a political rally, organizing a cultural club, experiencing a moment of transcendence. List classes you have taken that connect with your values. Name the last five books or articles that you have read (by choice). What do you see as a connection or theme that you can see in all of the selections? What did you enjoy about these articles? What does your reading say about you?

Some of the moments you recall may be painful as well as hopeful. You may have felt excluded, put down or powerless, as well as courageous, recognized, and inspired. Be sure to attend to these moments of “challenge” as well as to your moments of “hope”—and to learn to be able to articulate these moments in ways that can enable others to understand who you are. It is the combination of “criticality” and “hopefulness” that creates energy for change.

What was the last time you spent a day doing what you love doing? What in particular made you want to use that day in that way? What was memorable about the day? Is there a specific sight, sound or smell that you think of when you recall this day?

What factors were behind your decision to pursue a career in public work? Was there pressure to make different choices? How did you deal with conflicting influences?

Who in your life was the person to introduced you to your “calling” or who encouraged you to become active? Why do you think that they did this? What did your parents model? What was the role, if any, of a community of faith? Who did you admire?

Whom do you credit the most with your involvement now in work for your cause? What about their involvement in your life made a difference? Why do you think it was important to then to do so?

**Story of Us**

What community, organization, movement, culture, nation or other constituency do you consider yourself to be part of, connected with? Do you share in a common past? Do you share in a common future? Do you participate in this community as a result of
“fate,” “choice,” or both? How like or unlike the experience of others do you believe your own experience to be?

What do you know about the origins of this community? What stories are connected with it? Do you know what challenges the “founders” were responding to, what went into the choices that they made, how they felt about the outcomes? Do any of these stories inspire or challenge you?

What do you know about the critical challenges it faced as a community? What choices did it make at the time? Who were some of the key people involved? What challenges were they responding to? What were the outcomes? What were the lessons? Do any of these stories inspire or challenge you?

What celebrations, rituals, holidays, songs, poems, symbols, prayers, sayings, colors, sounds or smells are associated with these critical moments in the life of this community? What does it mean if there are none? What does it mean if people are “just going through the motions?”

What was the most significant decision you have made relating to your role as a participant, activist, or leader of this community? What was at stake for you and for others? Was there a lot of deliberation? If so, what influenced you to make the choice you made?

What are you working to achieve? What are the specific goals you have for your work? What barriers have you faced in trying to attain them? Were there ever moments of desperation? What have you done to overcome these difficult times?

When was the last time you felt very proud of your work? If you were to receive an award for your accomplishment, what values and virtues would you attribute it to? Who would you thank?

**Story of Now**

What is the biggest challenge this community faces now? Why is this a challenge? What is at stake? Why should anyone care? Why do you care? Can you tell a personal story about why you care about this challenge now, at this moment, in this place?

What are the choices that this community faces now? Why is it a choice? What if they don’t choose? What if they do? How can they make a choice? What’s your role in this? What’s at stake for you?

What can they hope for? If the challenge is so great, why is there hope of success? And even if hope of success is remote, why is action still required?

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Copyrighted in 2006 by Marshall Ganz who teaches at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. It draws on his experience working in several different movements for justice.