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What Is Public Narrative: Self, Us & Now

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PublicNarrative
self & us & now

PUBLIC NARRATIVE WORKSHEET

In this worksheet you will focus primarily on your story of self. But public narrative is not primarily a form of self-expression. It is an exercise of leadership by motivating others to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose. Although this worksheet focuses on your "story of self", the goal is to identify sources of your own calling to the purpose in which you will call upon others (story of us) to join you in action (story of now). Remember, public narrative requires learning a process, not writing a script. It can be learned only by telling, listening, reflecting, and telling again – over, over and over. This is to get you started.

1. **A story of now**: What urgent challenge do you hope to inspire others to take action on? What is your vision of successful action? What choice will you call on members of your community – in this case, your classmates - to make if they are to meet this challenge successfully? How can they act together to achieve this outcome? And how can they begin now, at this moment? Describe this "now" in two or three sentences.

2. **A story of us**: To what values, experiences, or aspirations of your community – in this case your classmates at the very least - will you appeal when you call on them to join you in action? What stories do you share that can express these values? Describe this "us" in two or three sentences.

3. **A story of self**: Why were you called to motivate others to join you in this action? What stories can you share that will enable others to "get you." How can you enable others to experience sources the values that move you not only to act, but to lead? Focus on this section, trying to identify key choice points that set you on your path.



telling your public narrative

WHY STORIES?

Stories are how we learn to make choices. Stories are how we learn to access the moral and emotional resources we need to face the uncertain, the unknown, and the unexpected

mindfully. Because stories speak the language of emotion, the language of the heart, they teach us not only how we "ought to" act, but can in inspire us with the "courage *to"* act. And because the sources of emotion on which they draw are in our values, our stories can help us translate our values into action.

A plot begins when a protagonist moving toward a desired goal runs into an unexpected event, creating a crisis that engages our curiosity, choices he or she makes in response, 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. The moral, revealed through the resolution, brings understanding of the head and of the heart. Stories teach us how to access moral resources to face difficult choices, unfamiliar situations, and uncertain outcomes. Each of us is the protagonist in our own life story; we face everyday challenges, we author our own choices, and we learn from the outcomes – the narrative of which constitutes who we are, our identity

By telling personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes, we become more mindful of our own moral resources and, at the same time, share our wisdom so as to inspire others. Because stories enable us to communicate our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.

Stories are specific – and visual - they evoke a very particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, texture, taste. The more you can communicate this visual 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. If you don't author your public story, others will, and they may not tell it in the way that you like.

A good story public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the "plot" of your life – the **challenges** you 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 why you have chosen the path you have allows others emotional and intellectual insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you.

story of now

WHAT URGENT "CHALLENGE" MIGHT YOU CALL ON US TO FACE?

WHAT VISION COULD WE ACHIEVE IF WE ACT?

WHAT "ACTION" MIGHT YOU CALL UPON US TO JOIN YOU IN TAKING?

PLEASE RESPOND WITH NO MORE THAN 2-3 SENTENCES.

A "story of now" is urgent, an urgency based on threat, or, equally, on opportunity; it is meant to inspire others to drop other things and pay attention; it is rooted in the values you celebrate in your story of self and us, but poses a challenge to those values. It contrasts a vision of the world as it will be if we fail to act, the world as it could be if we do act, and calls on us to act.

- *Do you value honoring those who sacrifice for their country? Does the care returning veterans receive meet this standard? If not, what are you going to do about it?*

- *Do you value passing on a livable world to the next generation? Do the measures being taken to deal with climate change meet this standard? If not, what are you going to do about it?*

- *Do you value a society in which individuals are only responsible for themselves and their families? Is being undermined by public policies, interest groups and others? What are you going to do about it?*

- *Do you value the principal that powerful institutions, especially If they benefit from public support, have moral responsibilities to the public in how they use their power? Which one's? How? What are you going to do about it?*

- *Do you value marriage as legitimate only between a man and a woman, a value placed at risk as a result of recent court decisions? What are you going to do about it?*

- *Do you value equal treatment under the law for all racial, religious, and cultural groups? Is that the case? If not, what are you going to do about it?*

Leaders who only describe a problem, but fail to inspire us to act together to try to solve the problem, aren't good leaders. Running through a list of "100 things you can do to make the world better" is a "cop-out." It trivializes each action. Suggesting that everyone work at it in their own way, ignores the significance of strategic focus in overcoming resistance to change. If

you are called to face a real challenge, a challenge so urgent that we are motivated to face it as well, you have a responsibility to invite us to join you in plausible action. A 'story of now" is not simply a call to be for or against something – that's "exhortation" – it is a call to take "hopeful" action. This means clarity as to what will happen if we don't act, what could happen if we do, and action each of us could commit to take that could start us in a clear direction right here, now, in this place.

If you ask me to "change a light bulb," for example, to deal with climate change, do you really think it will happen? Especially if it's among 100 other things I might – or might not – do? But if you ask me to join you in persuading the Kennedy School to change all of its light bulbs by signing a student petition, joining you in a delegation to the dean, and, adding my name to a public list of KSG students who have committed to changing the light bulbs where they live, what do you think the odds are of success?

A "story of now" works if people join you in action.

story of us

WHO IS THE "US" YOU WILL CALL UPON TO JOIN YOU?

WHAT MOTIVATING VALUES DO THEY SHARE?

WHAT EXPERIENCES HAVE YOU SHARED?

PLEASE RESPOND WITH NO MORE THAN 2-3 SENTENCES.

We are all part of multiple "us's" – families, faiths, cultures, communities, organizations, and nations in which we participate with others. What community, organization, movement, culture, nation, or other constituency do you consider yourself to be part of, connected with? With whom do you share a common past? With whom do you share 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? One way we establish an "us" – a shared identity – is through telling of shared stories, stories through which we can articulate the values we share, as well as the particularities that make us an "us."

Your challenge in this course is to inspire an "us" from among your classmates whom you will call upon to join you in action motivated by shared values, which you bring alive through story telling. There are many "us's" among your classmates, as there are in any community. They may think of themselves as an "us" based on enrolling in this class, dealing with the challenge of choosing classes, enrolling the same year, in the same program, dealing with family challenges, experiencing an acceptance letter, finding the money, time, space to be able to come here; experiencing the shock of arrival; sharing aspirations, backgrounds (work experience, religion, generation, ethnicity, culture, nationality, family status, etc.), experiences coming to school here, values commitments, career aspirations, career dilemmas, etc. Your challenge is to think through the "us" whom you can move to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose.

Some of the "us's" you could invite your classmates to join are larger "us's" in which you may already participate. You may be active in the environmental movement, for example, and may find others among your classmates who are as well. You may be active in a faith community, a human rights organization, a political campaign, a support organization, an immigrant association, a labor union, and alumni group, etc. Some "us's" have been around for literally thousands of years such as faith traditions – some only for a few days. Most "us's" that have been around tell stories about their founding, the challenges founders faced, how they overcame them, who joined with them, and what this teaches us about the values of the organization.

A story of us works if people identify with each other on behalf of values that inspire them to act.

story of self

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF YOUR OWN CALLING?

WHAT CRITICAL CHOICES POINTS CAN YOU RECALL?

WHAT STORIES CAN YOU TELL ABOUT THESE CHOICE POINTS?

PLEASE USE MOST OF YOUR PAPER TO ADDRESS THIS QUESTION

Now reflect on the sources of your motivation, your call to leadership, the values that move you to act. Grab a notebook, a 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.

You might start with your parents. What made them the people they became? How did their choices influence your own? Do you remember "family stories," perhaps told so often you may have gotten tired of hearing them. Why did they tell these stories and not others? What was the moral of these stories? What did they teach? How did they make you feel?

In your own life, consider the purpose for which you are telling your story, 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 help you begin. This is NOT a questionnaire They are NOT to be answered individually. They are to help you get your memory gears rolling so that 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 that are 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, projects you have led, and work that you have done that connects with your values. Name the last five books or articles that you have read (by choice) or movies or plays that you have seen. 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. Most people who want to make the world a better place have stories of pain, which taught them that the world needs changing, and stories of hope, which persuaded them of the possibility. You may have felt excluded, put down or powerless, as well as courageous, recognized, and inspired. Be sure to attend to the moments of "challenge" as well as to the 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 the 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 who 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? Whom 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 them to do so?

In the end you will be asked to **link your story of self, story of us, and story of now into a single public narrative.**

As you will see, however, this is an iterative – and non-linear – process. Each time you tell your story, you will adapt it – to make yourself clearer, to adjust to a different audience, to locate yourself in a different context. As you develop a story of us, you may find you want to alter your story of self, especially as you begin to see the relationship between the two more clearly. Similarly, as you develop a story of now, you may find it affects what went before. And, as you go back to reconsider what went before, you may find it alters your story of now.

You will not leave this class with a final "script" of your public narrative but you will learn a process by which you can generate that narrative over and over and over again when, where, and how you need to.

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