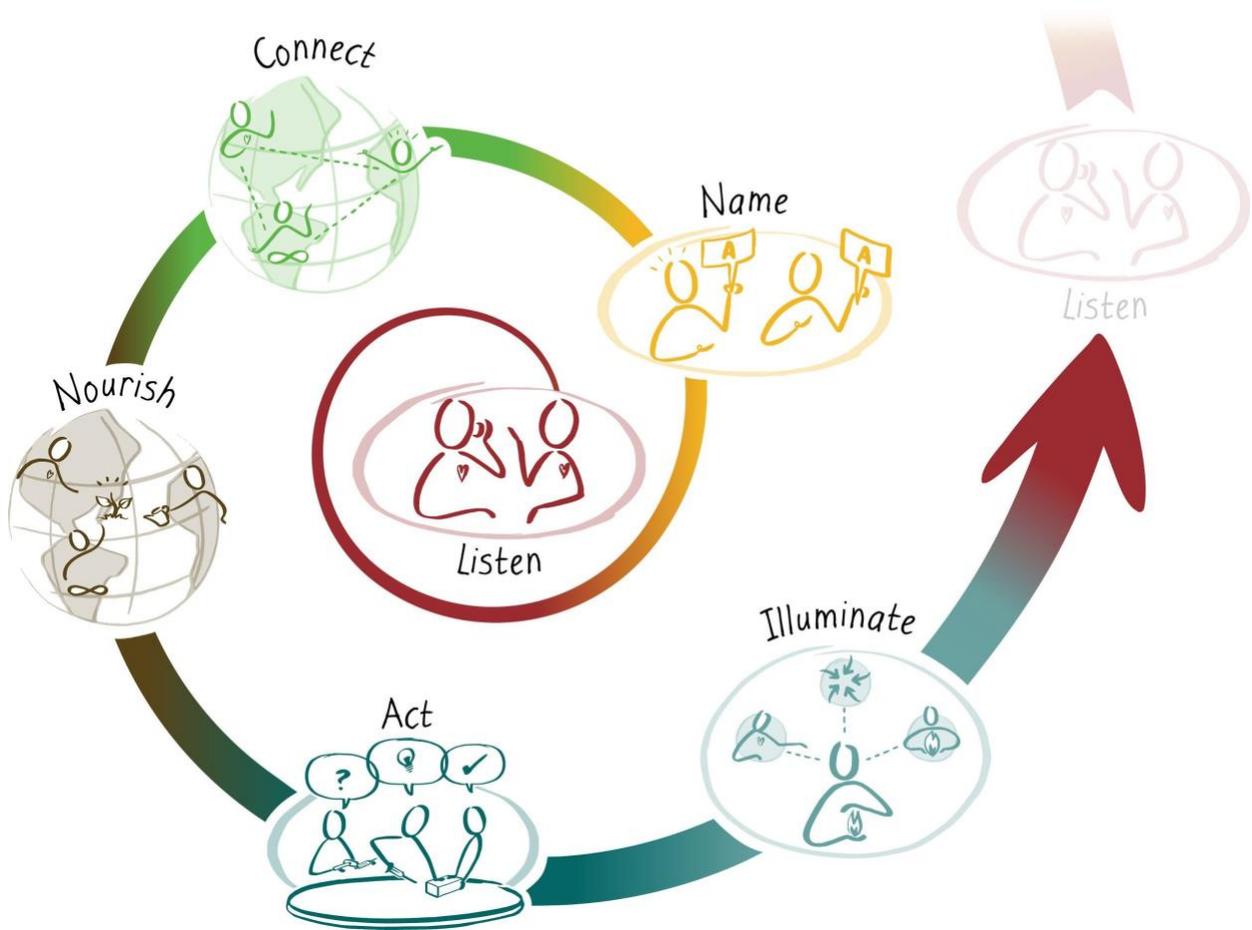


Spiral for Regenerating Communities



A Framework that Co-Creates Collective Impact

Introduction

Unsettled. That's a harmless word to describe these times.

Record-breaking climate disasters top the list of anomalies. In 2017, in just the United States, 16 separate events¹ cost over \$1 billion each and produced immeasurable social and emotional trauma. Add to that our social disasters -- the racial, income and gender inequalities that lead to homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, plus untreated physical and mental health challenges. On top of all of that, we face the terror of mass murders, endemic opioid addictions, fears of nuclear war, economic uncertainty and political upheavals.

This is our “now normal.”² Unsettled. Complex. As Dorothy said in *Wizard of Oz*, *this doesn't feel like Kansas anymore*. So, what the hell are we supposed to do? How do we navigate our lives when the present is chaotic, the stability of the past a fleeting memory, and the future cocooned?

We navigate these times together, reimagining how we want to live and discovering what is important for each of us to do. Collectively we can have enormous impact, co-creating the world we want, starting today, one step at a time in this now normal.

The Spiral of Co-Creating is one framework for collective impact. NewStories³ began research on this framework in our work after the social, economic and political collapse in Zimbabwe at the beginning of this century. We started to see it with more clarity as we worked with communities around the global South in the early part of the century.

It became a core element of our approach, growing out of our work with disasters in Japan where our Co-President, Bob Stilger, supported communities for five years after the Triple Disasters of March 11, 2011. A 9.0 magnitude earthquake was followed 45 minutes later by an enormous tsunami, which hit in some areas with waves over 125 feet tall and traveling over 50 miles an hour. The next day the nuclear reactors started to explode at Fukushima. As the waters receded, nearly 20,000 people were dead or missing and a half a million people were without homes, or jobs, or both. Japan entered a time with enormous grief and unparalleled uncertainty about where to begin and how to rebuild lives and communities.

¹ See <http://bit.ly/Climate-2017>

² Many speak of “new normal” these days, but this isn't new anymore. These disasters are growing annually in scope, impact and cost. This is our changing now – not old, not new, but what is right in front of our hearts and eyes.

³ NewStories is a nonprofit corporation established in 2000. We know that changing our stories – the way we see the world and make meaning – changes what's possible. We offer learning programs and services which help people step forward to offer leadership in their communities and organizations, using dialog to create new stories. We also provide an organizational framework for other initiatives doing similar work.

The disasters raised questions for many people about what was important in their lives – questions about how they wanted to live and where they wanted to place their energy and attention. These questions were present for people in the disaster area as well as across the whole country. Those of us who had been working with these communities knew traditional models of collaboration worked when outcomes were clear and we simply needed to make a feasible plan for getting from here to there. But these were not usual times. Clarity, when it existed, came in the form of images from the past. What if we wanted something new, something we couldn't easily define? What about those times when there was, at best, a sense of direction? How could we create something we hadn't seen before when we simply believed something else was possible? We started talking about co-creating, working together with both uncertainty and determination to construct a future we could not see.

By 2013 we started to form the Co-Cre Network in Japan -- an action learning collaborative of many people and communities spread all across Japan who were intent on co-creating a new future in a new way. NewStories was a founding partner of this network. Network members were Community Based Innovators -- people working in a particular place who got together with others at the local level and stepped up to problems or possibilities they saw.

We knew that back in the "old days," folks could get together, talk, make a plan and then take action. They could **collaborate** to create a collective impact. Collaboration, we said, works best when there is early agreement on desired outcomes. Strategies and tactics can be developed. The outcomes are specific and it is possible to define metrics which help measure progress in reaching those outcomes.

Collaboration still works when the issues we face are obvious, or a bit complicated, but still predictable in many ways. But what about the issues that are more complex or the situation is chaotic?⁴ In Japan we knew that something more than collaboration was required. We needed to figure out how to work effectively when the horizon is all fogged up and we couldn't see very far ahead. How could we act to make a difference that makes a difference we can't see? How would we cultivate a radical trust in unseen possibilities that we discovered through doing our work and reflecting on what actually happened?

We started to think about the difference between collaborating and co-creating.

A scenario for collaborating	A scenario for co-creating
The outcome desired is clear. There's enough agreement in the system to proceed. We know who needs to be involved for this to succeed and we can put disagreements and personalities aside to create a clear action plan where each different	A sense of direction is becoming visible. There are many unknowns. We know we must take action now and we can see where we might begin. Our sense is that we will make the path forward by walking on it, one step at a time. We are reluctant

⁴ David Snowden's Cynefin Framework is a helpful way to think about how our actions change based on whether the situation we confront is obvious, complicated, complex or chaos. See <http://bit.ly/Cynefine-AfterNow>

person and organization knows their assigned roles and responsibilities. We can formulate measures for success and tracking our progress towards our goals is pretty straightforward. We get going, eager to make things better. Good planning, coordination and tracking will see us through.

to latch on to a single fixed goal because we know it will narrow our vision. Instead we commit to staying connected with each other, trying stuff and learning from the results. We know that as we proceed, our destination will become more clear. Imagination, connection, creativity and continually turning to one another will see us through.

The Co-Cre Network wasn't based on a theory about how change happens, it was based on what we were seeing around us as people rebuilt after the disasters. Onagawa, a fishing village of 10,000 people that was 85% destroyed in the disasters, provides an excellent example. In Onagawa, immediately after the disasters, the longtime mayor said new leadership was needed to rebuild. He recruited a young man from Onagawa who was a member of the national legislature to run for office. Suda-san loved this tiny community, now almost destroyed, and was elected Mayor a little more than six months after the disaster. As soon as he took office, he looked at the plans, almost finalized, for rebuilding. Something felt off. He went back to the old mayor and asked him to speak frankly about what he thought of the plans. The old mayor said "I have some misgivings." The new mayor started asking more and more people, eventually convening small listening sessions in different neighborhoods. He started connecting people around their dreams. Ideas started to emerge -- pretty radical ones. "What if we removed the tops of the mountains surrounding our lovely harbor, creating plateaus where we build housing and then used the soil to build up a second plateau, above the sea-level harbor, as a commercial and services district?" Suda-san listened and listened again and with the community crafted a whole new plan.

Some highlights of the Onagawa story are in Chapter 9 of *AfterNow: When We Cannot See the Future, Where Do We Begin?*⁵ It started with listening. Possibilities were named. People got connected. They were nourished by insights and ideas from inside the community, and beyond. They acted together to pursue the possibilities they saw and they illuminated their ideas and results to attract the involvement and support of others. The radical changes that happened were created and embraced by the whole community.

We came to see the stages of this kind of work as a naturally occurring spiral, a form and pattern to pay attention to when we as human beings want to get something done.

The Stages of the Spiral

The NewStories Spiral of Co-Creating started to take shape while we partnered with The Berkana Institute⁶ for over a decade, inquiring with many partners around the world about how

⁵ See www.AfterNow.Today to learn more about NewStories work in Japan and the book *AfterNow: When We Cannot See the Future, Where Do We Begin?*

⁶ The Berkana Institute (www.berkana.org) was co-founded in 1992 by Margaret Wheatley and Myron Rogers, not long after Meg wrote "Leadership in the New Sciences." It's been a pioneer in looking at leadership and living systems.

change happens. Gradually, our work at NewStories focused more and more on disasters, crises, transitions, leadership and social innovation. In Japan, the US and other parts of the world, we continued to explore this idea of co-creating change. A six-stage spiral, a framework for navigating unsettled times and co-creating the results we wish to see, came into view.

We sometimes think about the spiral as a series of questions: *What else needs to be listened? How do we name what's starting to emerge? Who should be connected? What will nourish this possibility? What actions are becoming clear? How do we illuminate this story?* Each stage is a place to pause and inquire as we work together to co-create collective impact.



Listen for the Opening

Co-creating the changes we yearn for begins with **listening** with respect, curiosity and generosity. Stopping. Being still. Emptying your mind. Set aside your knowing and your grand strategies and plans. Listening even to the whispers for the seeds of possibility. Place your attention on the cracks in the old normal and listen to what is going on there. Notice what is already happening. Listen to everyone and everything.

When you are still enough, you will begin to see something beginning to shift. True listening means settling into a stance of attentiveness, beyond judgement and fear, where new possibilities begin to appear.

A hunter friend of ours speaks of going into the mountains each fall, seeking a deer for the coming year. On the first day, he says, it often seems like there is not much going on. By the second, small animals are beginning to appear. By the third or fourth, the deer have arrived. Of course, what's really going on is that each day he quiets more, listens more, sees more. Listening is a "full-body sport." The ears play a key role, but deep listening comes from our whole body -- our skin and hearts and hands and mind.



Name the Possibilities

As we listen, we start to see patterns and possibilities. We turn to others who are also listening and dialogue about what we are seeing. We ask questions and stay open, resisting the urge to jump to premature conclusions. Our listening often leads to more questions to be explored. Often, in an instant, something becomes clear. Pieces that seemed separate resolve themselves into a form that we can name.

Naming creates visibility and attraction. Often those who will create the new begin alone. When they are able to name what they see, it becomes a rallying cry, allowing those who care about similar changes begin to find each other. Change starts to happen when those called to similar efforts begin to notice they are not alone and start to connect with each other.



Connect the Innovators

Our work at NewStories is often with Community Based Innovators - the people who have stepped forward to change their own lives and to improve their communities or organizations. Innovators are often isolated, even in their own local communities. That often begins to shift as they take action and begin to bump into others who are either doing similar work in the community or who are doing different things that are somehow connected. When connected, they share learning and find new action. Beyond this web of local connections, they begin to connect with each other across distance and difference, learning together and creating enabling structures that support the local changes they nurture. Enabling structures for connecting innovators at local and translocal levels are essential for systemic change.

While doing a Listening Tour for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation on creating a Culture of Health⁷ in 2016, in Cherokee Nation, NewStories came across Noah's Farm⁸ - a social business creating an aquaponics farm which produces a livelihood for the organizers, creates a sellers cooperative capable of handling large orders from warehouse stores, and also grows food that could be donated to food banks. Mary from Grand Nation in Vinita was looking for a new business opportunity for people recovering from drug addictions. We connected her with Richard from Noah's Farm in Vian. Later, when Richard ran into a major challenge because of government regulations on processing of the tilapia fish grown on the farm, it was Mary who connected him to someone who had the solution. Often, innovators begin alone. Their ideas begin to broaden and mature when connected with others.

While some connecting happens easily and naturally through one-to-one encounters like the one described above in Cherokee Nation, sometimes a bit more structure and process is needed. At NewStories we use an approach we co-created in Japan called FutureSessions⁹, designing and facilitating community meetings and workshops to connect and convene innovators.

⁷ See <http://bit.ly/Listening-CoH> for a report on the design and findings of the Culture of Health Listening Tour.

⁸ See <http://bit.ly/NoahsFarm> for an overview of this initiative.

⁹ See <http://bit.ly/FutureSessions-AfterNow> to learn more about how to design and host FutureSessions.



Nourish the Community

These local and translocal communities grow when nourished. Nourishing the community includes identifying synergies, pooling existing knowledge, sharing resources, and creating safe spaces to question and learn together. As the community becomes more connected and nourished, next steps become clear and strategies for action can be defined. The strategies themselves always include a list of other things that must be investigated and learned, reaching beyond the community to explore the knowledge and expertise of others. All of this is done with an eye towards just enough, just in time. Work in community is, itself more research, not trying to come up with the “right answer,” but finding our way through the territory towards what’s important right now.

One of our favorite examples of nourishing the community comes from “Try This, West Virginia¹⁰” Every June, people come together from communities across the state. They bring with them stories of the work they’ve done to make their communities more healthy and resilient. They talk about their successes and challenges and they begin to hatch new ideas. The gathering is delightfully unpretentious; the spirit one of *try this, it might work for you too*.



Take Action Together

Systems which are connected and nourished naturally become a foundation for action. People trust each other enough to stand up and step forward together. Co-creating is about taking action and tracking the results of that action. We come together to do something we couldn’t imagine or undertake alone. We act now, not waiting until we figured out the perfect plan and raised all the needed funds. It’s about starting anywhere, doing something, pausing, reflecting, adapting and acting again.

Acting together means learning together -- and the actions we take just keep getting stronger. When we take action, sometimes the results are good, sometimes not so much. We have to act, pause, look back and chew our experiences, learning from them so we can define the next step forward. When our friends in Zimbabwe created Kufunda Learning Village¹¹ in the early part of this century, they knew rural villagers and urban folk needed new ways to thrive in a country edging towards collapse. They found a place to begin, inviting people into a range of classes and workshops at Kufunda. Then they discovered they needed to go into the villages. Then they realized they needed to bring youth together from many villages. Each action they took was the basis learning more, sometimes changing course, other times seeing that they had hit on something that could be spread. This series of discoveries has continued for more than 15 years, taking action and making a path by walking it.

¹⁰ See <https://trythiswv.com> for a full description of this statewide eco-system of change.

¹¹ See www.kufunda.org as an example of taking action together and learning each step along the way.

Illuminate New Stories



Illumination – making what’s happening visible both in the local community and those beyond – serves a number of purposes. It requires a pause, a looking back and taking account of what’s happened so far on this journey. It serves as a reminder to the community that’s done the work: *see, here’s what we’ve accomplished already!* Illumination provides a basis for inviting others to join, broadening the work underway. It creates a story to share with those who have resources -- funds, materials, relationships -- which can help to continue and grow the work. It also serves as an inspiration to people in other communities who can take the learning and apply it in their own communities.

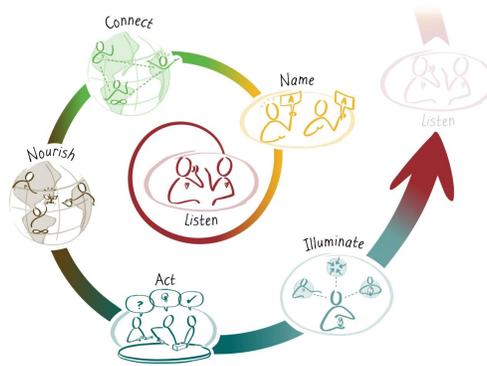
Powerful illumination addresses some critical questions:

1. **What happened?** Identify several specific things that happened because of your project. What changed? What specific action took place? Where?
2. **How did your work contribute?** What specifically did you do that led to this result? Can you verify this influence?
3. **What is significant about this?** Why are these results important? What do they make possible?
4. **What helped, and what didn’t?** Take a step back and identify the specific things that helped to create these results? What things don’t seem to have helped?
5. **What is the deeper story?** What can you share that will inspire, inform, and attract support?

These questions and ones like them come from research over the last 20 or so years about how to measure “emergence” using “complexity aware” approaches. Developmental Evaluation, Outcome Harvesting, and Most Significant Change¹² are some of the tools in this field. Unfortunately, many of us don’t apply these or other methodologies. We’re content to do our work, voice our disdain for conventional logic models and other metrics, and hope for the best. We’re often stymied in our attempts to explain what we’re doing and why to others whose support and involvement is important to our next steps.

Illumination which addresses questions like these informs, inspires and invites. It creates a context for even more listening as we dip in for another journey around the spiral.

¹² A starting point to explore these three approaches, and others, is <http://www.betterevaluation.org>



Describing this as a spiral can create a sense of linearity, of one stage leading to the next. This is partially true. There is a progression in the spiral: listening does lead to naming, which provides a basis for connecting and nourishing, which creates opportunities to act and results to illuminate.

It's also the case that the whole spiral is present in each stage. Using just one stage as an example, when taking action together, the listening continues -- *what else must we pay attention to?* A willingness to reach out to others and connect them is also present as are continued questions about what else will nourish this emerging possibility. Always there needs to be an eye towards discerning results that can be illuminated to tell the stories of what's happening and invite the involvement and resources required to grow.

The spiral is not prescriptive. It is an invitation to see and work with these natural stages as we dance with the unknown, creating a future we cannot yet see.

Acknowledging the Nature of these Times

At NewStories we know we are in a time between stories. Almost three quarters of a century ago, with the end of World War II, in the US, we entered the era of the American Dream: work hard, get ahead, buy a house, send the kids to college so they can do better. These days that dream works for some and doesn't for many. This old story no longer provides way to make meaning in our lives, and, for the most part, we don't have a new story!

That old story no longer provides ways to make meaning in our lives, and, for the most part, we don't have a new story! Many feel they don't have enough -- time, money, happiness, security. There's a sense of something missing. Combine this with our continuous cascades of disasters - climate, social, emotional, natural, economic, political – and we've got a mess.

These unpredictable but persistent disasters create new acute stress which lands on that bed of chronic stress. This is especially true for those most chronically stressed -- homeless, unemployed and underemployed, with physical and mental health challenges, forced to the margins because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality. The cumulative traumatic stress wrecks lives and breaks communities.

Our work across many cultures, continents and contexts points to traumatic stress - the interaction between acute and chronic stress - as a cumulative and prolonged negative result of repeated adverse events such as "natural" disasters, human-caused destruction, environmental damage, structural injustice, and psychological trauma. This traumatic stress literally rips the fabric of community to shreds.

We begin to repair that fabric by intentionally creating practices, processes and structures which promote social cohesion and decrease chronic stress. We do so by reweaving community, exercising the ability we have in modern society to ensure long-term well-being for *all*. We can respect human dignity. We can provide equitable access to our abundant resources. We can participate in community together, honoring different individual choices while cultivating the experience of being valued and of *BELONGING*.

We do it by listening, naming, connecting, nourishing, acting and illuminating. The stages of the spiral, we believe, are critical in these times. We must build healthy, connected communities which temper the dominant individualism in our society in favor of a communal approach to caring for one another. It is time to shift from an "I" orientation to more of a "We" orientation, fostering a willingness to engage across difference, to not shrink back from potential conflict, and to proceed with curiosity and openness to understand the other. We must learn to listen and connect to each other in community, discovering the issues and problems and opportunities most important and taking concrete local actions that make life better and which builds community.

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