Preparing for the Possible

New stories of possibilities are arising everywhere. We must midwife them. They guide us on our journey towards a future we cannot quite see.

These are tumultuous times. In systems terms, we’ve entered a time of punctuated equilibrium that presages a shift from where we are now to something mostly unknown and barely visible. We can influence the nature of this shift by focusing on what’s essential -- the lives and communities we want. We do so in a time of continuous cascading disasters - environmental, climate, social, personal and political - without losing heart. We focus on what is truly important while simultaneously being prepared for the next disasters coming our way. We do this together.

Preparing for the Possible is a new network in the region stretching from Northern California to Alberta, Canada. The network will magnify and multiply community-based efforts already building healthy and resilient communities while also increasing local readiness to prepare for and recover from disasters. The network will use four strategies: **Connect** community leaders. **Curate** and make available examples of what communities are already doing. **Convene** critical conversations at local, sub-regional and regional levels. **Create** new strategies and resources.

In 2018, the United States saw multiple, unprecedented natural disasters, from the deadliest wildfire in California's history to the worst hurricane to hit the East Coast since 1969. Rain and mudslides hit wildfire-scarred areas of California, flattening homes, covering freeways, and claiming many lives. Flash flooding devastated Ellicott City, Maryland with residents scrambling to flee streets that turned into raging rivers from the eight inches of rain that fell in under one hour. Already in 2019, the North American blizzards produced two feet of snow in the Midwest, rapid snowmelt following the storm caused historic flooding and some areas received hurricane-
force wind gusts – a storm said to be comparable to the 1993 Storm of the Century. By early summer record numbers of tornadoes have hit the Midwest, and fires are already starting again in the west. What a time!

You’ve heard the old story about the frog in the boiling water? It’s not true. The frog jumps out. Can we humans learn to pay as much attention? Can we be prepared for sudden changes?

Our water is boiling. The loss of life, the grief and trauma, the destruction of property and habitat – it can all be overwhelming. Looking at economic costs alone, in 2017-18 in the US we have had 30 disasters with a price tag in excess of $1 billion each. While there may be things we can do to lessen the scope of these some of these disasters in the future, we all need to recognize that we live in volatile and unpredictable times where near neighbors are our greatest source of strength as we make friends with the unexpected. We can do this. We can be more ready together.

In addition to these climate disasters, we’re also in a time of social disasters -- the racial, income and gender inequities that lead to homelessness, unemployment and underemployment plus untreated physical and mental health challenges. On top of all of that we have economic uncertainty, terror of mass murders, endemic opioid addiction, fear of nuclear war and a world in upheaval. This is our “NOW NORMAL.” This is our changing world.

We’re alive in a time when we must learn how to live well with the unexpected -- be it extreme weather, forest fires, earthquakes, mass murders or sudden shifts in governmental policies. In this time when stress and trauma are widespread, we need to prepare the communities in which we live to be better able to work with whatever comes.

This network isn’t just about disaster – it is also about how we prepare for what else is possible in our lives and our communities. This is a time for bold new dreams and visions. It is a time for us to talk with each other about the lives we want to live and the communities we want to live in. It’s a time to envision ourselves in a new story where we experience deep delight in being alive.

We can prepare for the possible by connecting, curating, convening and creating. And we need to do so now.

**Purpose**

We need to change our story so we can change what’s possible when it comes to communities and disasters in our Northwest region.

The old story is that disasters are cataclysmic and tragic events beyond our control and when they happen, we have to get back to the way things were as quickly as we can. That old story is incomplete. We need new ones. Here are a few:

- Connected communities, where people feel like they belong and are valued and included, are essential in preparing for and responding to disasters.
- Disasters illuminate underlying community problems and issues in ways which make them visible, undeniable and approachable if we choose to act.
- Many people in disaster affected areas experience a big wake-up call, an invitation to think about what is really important in their lives.
- The bigger the disaster, the greater the opportunity to define new visions and new priorities within our communities and to build our community’s will for new action.
We need these stories. They provide insight, inspiration and information that can help us build the communities and lives we want, right now. The purpose this network for *Preparing for the Possible* is to help people and communities step into these new stories and to discover what else is possible in our lives in these times.

NewStories is working with community leaders in the Northwest to co-imagine and co-create a regional network that helps people prepare for the possible before and after disaster. We use an appreciative approach that recognizes that many of the strategies and solutions needed to build healthy and resilient communities are already being developed and tested throughout the region. This local work is frequently isolated and hard to see. We need to lift up what's already underway to make it visible and connect those doing the work so they can learn with and from each other. We need to hear these stories. In 2019 our focus is with communities in Northern California because there wildfires over the last 5 years have touched just about everyone and many people are looking for what comes next.

Connected communities, where people feel they belong and are included, are the soil for preparing, recovering and regenerating. Connected communities foster the personal and social preparation needed to act quickly when disaster hits.
What is becoming clear to us is that we must focus simultaneously in all three areas:

- **PREPARING**, establishing personal practices that become a familiar and normal part of our daily lives and prepare for likely future disasters.
- **RECOVERING**, bouncing back after disaster because the systems in place are community-based and community-aware.
- **REGENERATING**, cultivating and working from a deep understanding of the land and those who have inhabited it for centuries past to create new patterns for human habitation.

In disasters, some people lose their homes, more lose their livelihoods and others lose their lives. Disasters give birth to pervasive trauma and grief and they shine a spotlight on all the social problems and issues already present. At a deeper level, they are also frequently a wake-up call and a huge invitation to reconsider what’s really important in our lives. How do we work with that invitation?

**Our Current Context and Approach**

Stepping back a bit, at NewStories we know that this is a time between stories. Almost three quarters of a century ago, with the end of World War II, the American Dream was born: work hard, get ahead, buy a house, send the kids to college so they can do better. These days that dream works for some but doesn’t for many.

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 persistent but unpredictable disasters create new acute stress which lands on a 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**.

Many different terms describe this space -- **fabric of community, social cohesion, belonging, community resilience**. Each term invites us to ask how we create healthy, connected communities which embrace both individualism in our society and our need as human beings to stay together and care 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. How do we learn to listen and connect to each other in community, discovering our most important
issues and problems and opportunities? How do we engage in the community conversations which will lead to concrete local actions that make life better and which build social cohesion?

At NewStories we know that increasing social cohesion provides a foundation for resilience for everyone in the community. When social cohesion is absent, polarization between groups, competition for resources, intercultural tension, chronic homelessness, or other stress symptoms appear, all of which impede resilience. People who are not integrated into the social fabric of the whole community are marginalized, unable to access resources and knowledge essential to live a good life. We can do better.

The Good News
The things we are writing about here are already happening in communities throughout the region. Numerous initiatives are working to build healthy and resilient communities. In many places folks are figuring how how to be prepared for disasters. In those same places, government and citizens are working together to created community-based systems to recover quickly after disaster hits.

When we say region, we’re referring to the lands where NewStories has worked over the last two decades. This region stretches from northern California through Oregon and Washington, up into British Columbia and Alberta, and over into Idaho and Montana. Someone asked us recently why we were not doing any work in Puerto Rico. Our response was that we would show up in a heartbeat if invited, but we haven’t walked on those paths or mingled in that culture. The Northwest of the US and Southwest of Canada are our home. We know these lands.

There’s an amazing array of good, strong local work throughout this region. Unfortunately, it is often barely visible in the communities where it is happening and is largely invisible elsewhere. Let’s change that.

Scope of Work
NewStories has been in conversation with many people across the region, sensing in to what might make a difference now. We envision a four-part work program:

Connect community leaders -- grassroots, business, nonprofit, academic and government -- who focus on using regenerative principles to re-imagine and re-create community

Curate and make available examples of what communities are already doing -- challenges, successes and impacts -- to resolve seemingly intractable problems and to be disaster-ready, stepping towards new possibilities.

Convene critical conversations at local, sub-regional and regional levels to expand regenerative community-based and community-aware strategies. In addition, train community leaders on designing and facilitating conversations that matter and on taking local action to implement strategies that work.

Create new strategies and resources to invite, inspire and inform others about our current problems and possibilities in this region.
These steps, we believe, lead to systemic change. As natural, social, economic and political disasters proliferate, we are headed one way or another to a major shift. The critical question is how do we, together, influence that shift and co-create the lives and communities we want?

The network will connect people with listening. We’ve already been engaging with people in communities across the region as well as those further away. We need to listen more. We want to do a “Preparing for the Possible Listening Tour” throughout the region, similar to the Listening Tour on Creating a Culture of Health we conducted for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2016.

Working through our extensive connections in the region, we want to document what is already happening at both the level of story -- what’s happening and how is it changing people’s lives -- and share these how-to-details. We will work with new and existing partners in the region and schedule listening sessions with both individuals and groups. NewStories will look for opportunities to use our skills as facilitators to convene the conversations local groups already want to have in our communities. Our intent, in 2019, is to do this listening and connecting throughout the region -- northern California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Alberta, western Montana and Idaho.

Initially, the network will curate these stories on a simple new Preparing for the Possible website using a powerful visual database we have developed at NewStories. On our NewStories website we call it Essential Knowledge. This tool is configured so that others can add more stories which will be reviewed and added to the data collection. Our intent in the beginning is to keep this simple, working from materials the communities have created themselves as well as coaching them on how to produce powerful case stories. As the project continues, we will make these existing materials more graphically appealing, accessible and informative.

Our work to convene starts with the listening tour. NewStories has decades of experience in bringing people together for conversations that matter. We call these conversations FutureSessions, an approach we developed in Japan after the Triple Disasters of March 11, 2011. Many times, when we meet in communities and organizations, the most important things that happen are the conversations outside the formal program which is often contentious and frequently boring. It doesn’t have to be that way. Preparing for the Possible will:

- Help local groups develop more sophisticated designs and processes for convening conversations that matter in their communities using our FutureSession approaches, co-facilitating these sessions when desired.
- Work with members of the network to plan and co-create convenings which bring people from different communities together to look at issues across sub-regions and the region as a whole.
- Train network members in how to design and facilitate FutureSessions which can lead to insight and action.

Finally, as the network proceeds with connecting, curating and convening, we’ll turn our attention what else we can create. There is a nascent movement already growing around the ideas expressed here. These ideas don’t belong to NewStories; we’re part of a large community that’s thinking about what else is possible. It’s time to make this new story visible. Each of the

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1 See the report from this Listening Tour: [http://bit.ly/Listening-CoH](http://bit.ly/Listening-CoH)
2 We will use our existing graphic interface to begin -- [https://newstories.org/essential-knowledge-main/](https://newstories.org/essential-knowledge-main/), eventually replacing it with a Preparing for the Possible website.
earlier stages will contribute. And we suspect more is needed to attract people’s attention -- inviting, inspiring and informing them.

We envision new writing which surfaces the patterns in curated stories and helps to show these approaches across the region. We also want short video and audio podcasts illuminating these same patterns. While we will begin work with a simple WordPress website in 2019, we also want to create a visually engaging and attention-grabbing site that can draw others to these approaches. As the network emerges, we’ll see what else needs to be created.

Evaluation

We must use careful evaluation to guide the growth of this network. Over the last 20 or so years there has been substantial research on how to measure the emergent styles of community building. Collectively these are “complexity aware” approaches⁴. Developmental Evaluation, Outcome Harvesting, and Most Significant Change 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.

The network will be asking members to measure and share the impact of their work, working with five key questions:

1. **What happened?** Identify several particular things that happened because of your project. 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 think about what specific things helped to create these results? What things don’t seem to have helped?
5. **What is the deeper story?** What is the deeper story here that you can tell to inspire, inform, and attract support?

Let Us Hear from You

NewStories, is a 501(c)3 corporation founded in the Northwest in 2000. We are the catalyst for this initiative. Our attention turned to disasters in 2011 when our Co-President, Bob Stilger, was called into service in Japan after the Triple Disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear explosions on March 11, 2011. He spent five years working with people in the disaster area and across Japan, supporting them in grieving what was gone, sensing into what was to come, and acting together to create the new. The English edition of his book, *AfterNow: When We Cannot See the Future, Where Do We Begin*³ was published in late 2017, two years after the Japanese edition. His work in Japan followed many years of work with people and communities in the Global South who have been pioneering approaches to building thriving communities with what they have, rather than being overwhelmed about what they lack.

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⁴ One simple footnote cannot do justice in any way to this growing field. But a starting point to explore these three approaches, and others, is [http://www.betterevaluation.org](http://www.betterevaluation.org)

In late 2017, NewStories was among those who showed up in Northern California after the fires to support people there. Part of our work was to see what relevance lessons from Japan had here in North America. Since then we have been in dozens and dozens of explorations with people throughout the Northwest and across the continent about how to work with the increasing incidences of disaster in a generative way. What’s necessary and what’s possible in this time?

*Preparing for the Possible* is an idea that’s been growing and that we’ve been discussing with many people since 2018. Please let us hear your thoughts about this network and how you’d like to be involved.

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