

# Story Shapes and Hope Coaching in Public Narrative Story of Self

By Rosi Greenberg

## Introduction

Public Narrative is a leadership framework created by Marshall Ganz at the Harvard Kennedy School that brings the power of narrative to the work of leadership. Through Public Narrative we connect Self to Other to Action in order to motivate values-based change and enable leadership. Leadership, in Ganz's definition, is *accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty*. Sharing public stories supports leadership as it reminds us of why we are choosing said responsibility, supports us in gathering together a community in solidarity with one another around shared values, and enables us to motivate others to action around what matters most. This is a living framework, constantly in evolution as learners become teachers and make it their own, as teaching fellows spend late-night hours honing the craft, and as we all mutually learn from organizers and communities we partner with around the world. What follows is some of my learning and hopefully a contribution to the learning community.

New to Public Narrative? [Here's a great simple article outlining the framework.](#)

For the past several years I have been teaching and coaching Public Narrative with frontline organizers and nonprofit groups across the US and the world. I have chosen to focus especially on communities that have been stigmatized or marginalized, where there is huge leadership by and for the people facing oppression and challenge. Specifically, I have found a home working with recovery advocates – those in recovery from Substance Use Disorder and their allies, working for harm reduction, prevention, and human-centered laws, and combatting stigma – as well as women veterans – former members of the military transitioning into civilian service. Members of both communities are organizing with a fierce sense of possibility in themselves, others, and the future. I find personal connection to the existential despair, mental health challenges, and lack of agency or control that many have experienced, and I find huge love and hope in witnessing the communal care, championing, and life force that exists in both spaces.

I have been teaching Public Narrative, but more importantly I've been getting to live it as an embodied craft. Over my past six years of teaching, I went from feeling like "I don't have a story" to "I haven't made choices in my life" to "Wow I'm an incredible healer, artist, and facilitator" and "I know my purpose to connect people more deeply to ourselves and others through speaking



By Rosi Greenberg, based on the works of Marshall Ganz of Harv

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we need others to help us see what we swim in.

truth.” I have been honored to get to learn with and from both communities.

Public Narrative teaching and learning is supported by coaches, who ask guiding questions to enable storytellers to find new truths in our stories. We are all “fish in our own water” and sometimes need others to point out or ask about elements of our lives that we otherwise might not notice as salient to our leadership. I have been training new coaches on the craft and process of Public Narrative coaching, and over time have developed a framework for diagnosing the most helpful elements of a story to coach, given what is presented by the storyteller. What is presented here is meant to support new coaches in sensing where to coach within a story, and how to get there efficiently and effectively.

I’ve been focusing especially on Story of Self as the first component of the three-legged stool of Self-Us-Now, and in particular, the role of hope in Stories of Self. Story of Self is the foundation for the other two stories. In addition, I admit a bias: I have personally been interested in Story of Self for the transformative ‘aha’ moments I have witnessed as people re-narrate their own lives in more agentic ways, myself included.

A caveat before I dive in: this is a framework drawn out of practice and experience, and is, as such, only a faint outline of the thing it tries to describe. This framework is to the stories as a pencil-sketched outline of a tree is to a living, breathing Oak. Please let this be a warning - especially to new coaches - not to take this framework as the only way to understand story, or as the skeleton for story itself.

## Story of Self

A few years ago, a woman who was a plaintiff in a major #metoo case came to one of my workshops. She sat, disheveled, saying her life started at 22 with the sexual abuse she suffered, and she was doing the case because she had to, she had no choice. Eyes on the floor, no hope. I asked about earlier on, where her courage came from. What made her know that she could stand up and have a voice? Thinking back, she found a moment at age 12 where she actually saved her own mothers life. The courage of that moment rippled through her and through our small group. She looked up at me with clear eyes full of possibility and said “Oh my God – I’m powerful.”

That’s the magic of story, and the magic of coaching.

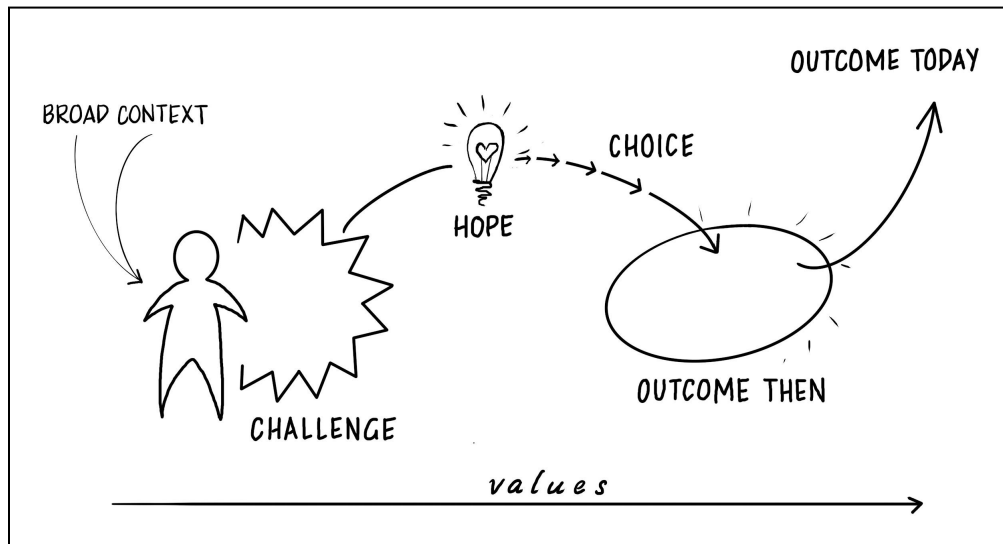
Story of Self is about understanding one’s call to leadership. In what moments in one’s life did they learn the values that bring them to their calling, and to their leadership? So, Story of Self is about when a person learned that some conditions in life required leadership, and when – and why – they chose to accept that responsibility, not only for self-betterment but for the enabling of others and change in the world. At its core, Story of Self is about agency, the emotional capacity to make mindful choices, and the conditions in one’s life that seeded, nurtured, and grew that agency within the storyteller.

In telling a story of self, one gives meaning to the experiences of their lives, weaving together early moments of experience with later choices and vocation. Creating this narrative is a powerful act, as it actively creates or reinforces a lens with which we look at ourselves or the world. Our stories about ourselves can and do affect our self-esteem, mood, and attitude towards life (White, 2007). Many of us have lenses or 'storylines' we use as a default to share, and with strong coaching, Story of Self can be a place to question and re-narrate the storyline of our lives in a positive way. Doing this re-narration in public, and in the context of real-world leadership, allows witnessing and immediate, real-world consequence, which may allow the narrative shift to have even more sticking power and fuel important work in the world.

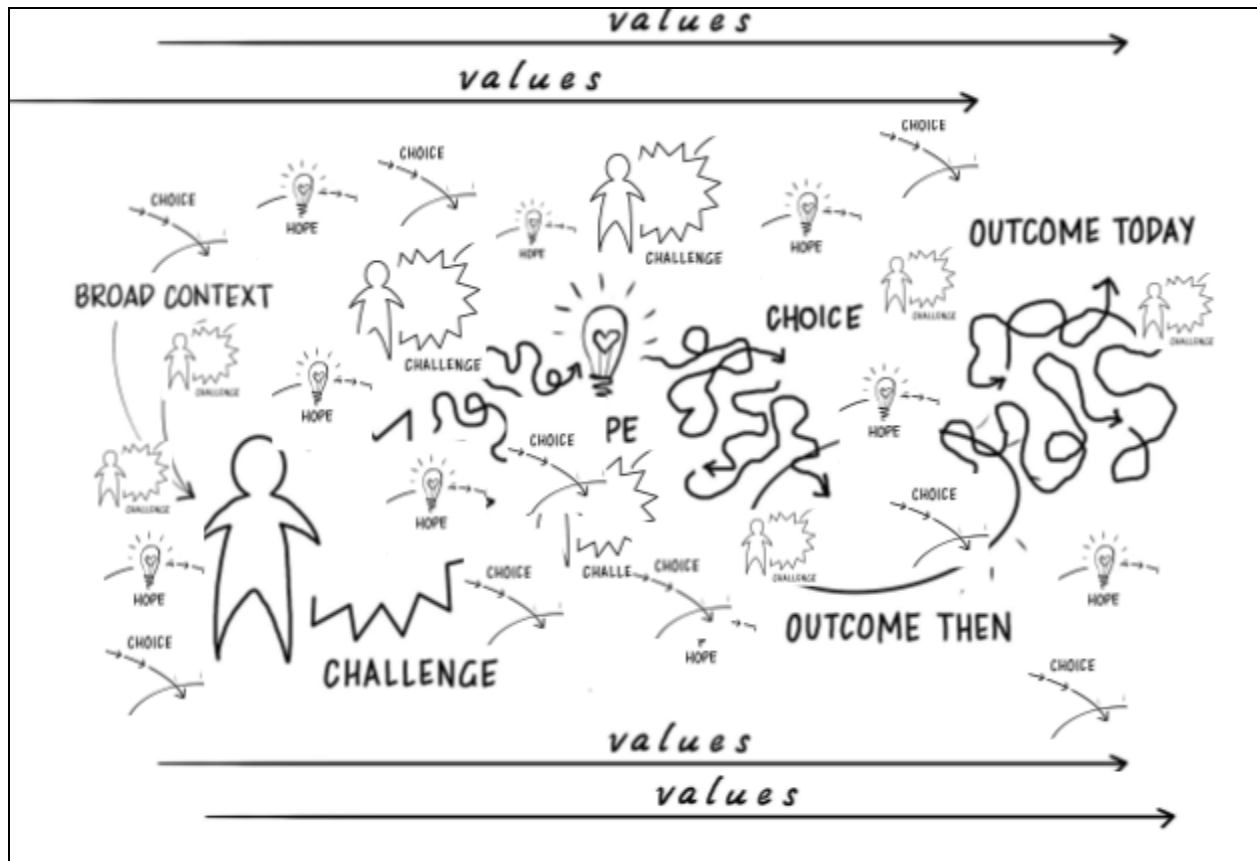
Hearing a powerful story of self motivates and instills hope in its listeners. When we hear of others mustering courage to face challenges, we learn that it is possible for us to do so as well. When we hear of the sources of resilience, hope, and self-esteem in others' stories, we explore our own lives for similar guiding forces. And when we hear of others making choices based on that sense of possibility and meaning, we too may find the fortitude to make hard choices in our own lives. Sharing hopeful stories of self actively invites the emotional experience of hope in listeners and reminds us all of the human potential for care, love, support, and courage.

A Story of Self, as Ganz teaches it, centers on an 'origin' moment, that is, the origin of the values that call us to our leadership. Our values, we say, are seeded early on in life, before 17-18 years old, often as early as 5-10. Later, in our teenage and young adult years, we act on those values and they become ours, rather than our parents' or caregivers'. In an origin story, we are looking for moments of challenge, when we learned that perhaps not all was right with the world. And we are looking for the choices we made in the face of those challenges, sparked by a sense of hope or possibility that something other than that challenge could come about. It is the emotions we feel in those moments and the choices we make then, that show our values. We often find that these early responses to challenges have everything to do with the way we respond to challenges now, and the values that guide our lives. So all Stories of Self contain a challenge, a source of hope, a choice based on that hope, the outcome of that choice, and the connection to calling / leadership today.

A simple graphic for this could be:

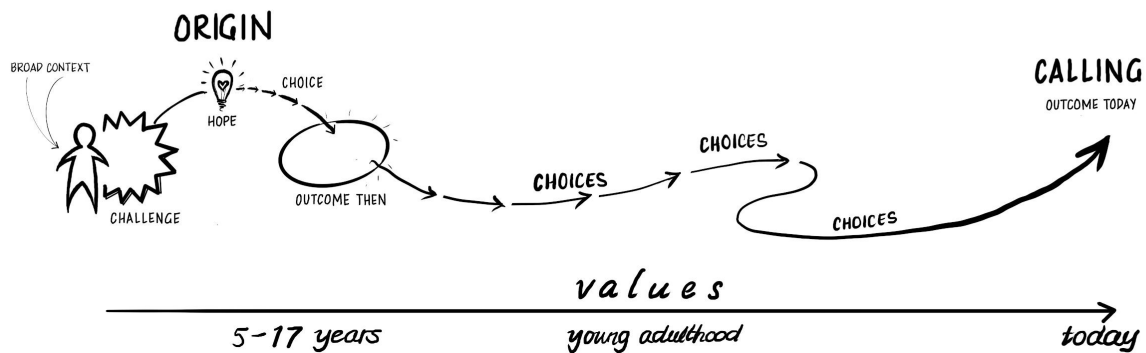


Obviously this is very simplified and it's more like this:



But part of our work is telling a coherent story so I'm using simplified diagrams – just don't let them trick you into thinking that our lives—or our stories—are simple!

Really, since we're looking at origin moments early on in life, and there are many later choice points in between those early moments and today, a more accurate simplified visual might be this:



Note that the main challenge-hope-choice-outcomes that we're looking at are early on, between the ages of 5-17.

These stories are told in detailed story moments, which enable listeners to see, hear, and witness a particular experience in the storyteller's life. Stories told in this way are much more powerful – contrast the emotional experience of watching a play to the emotional experience of reading the table of contents of a memoir. Story moments are the building blocks of narrative.

As coaches, we are coaching to moments of challenge, and moments of hope and choice, rather than just mentions or headlines.

My Story – an example:

We as coaches always tell our stories before asking anyone else to tell theirs. This ensures that we practice what we preach and engage in "join me in" leadership rather than "you go do" directive authority. This is often the most vulnerable part of the work for me. And I'll do it here too, both to demonstrate that vulnerability and to show how this model applies in an actual story.

So here's the story I've been telling lately (with the HUGE caveat that I never write my story out - I tell it from my heart when I'm in front of a group, and so the inflections, the exact words, the moments, are not as static as they feel in writing. I'm imagining you, future reader, listening as I'm telling this to you over coffee. So here we go...)

I'm the oldest daughter of a single-mother-by-choice Rabbi. My mom had five children herself, with the use of donor dads and adoption, which was not typical in the late 80s/early 90s. As the

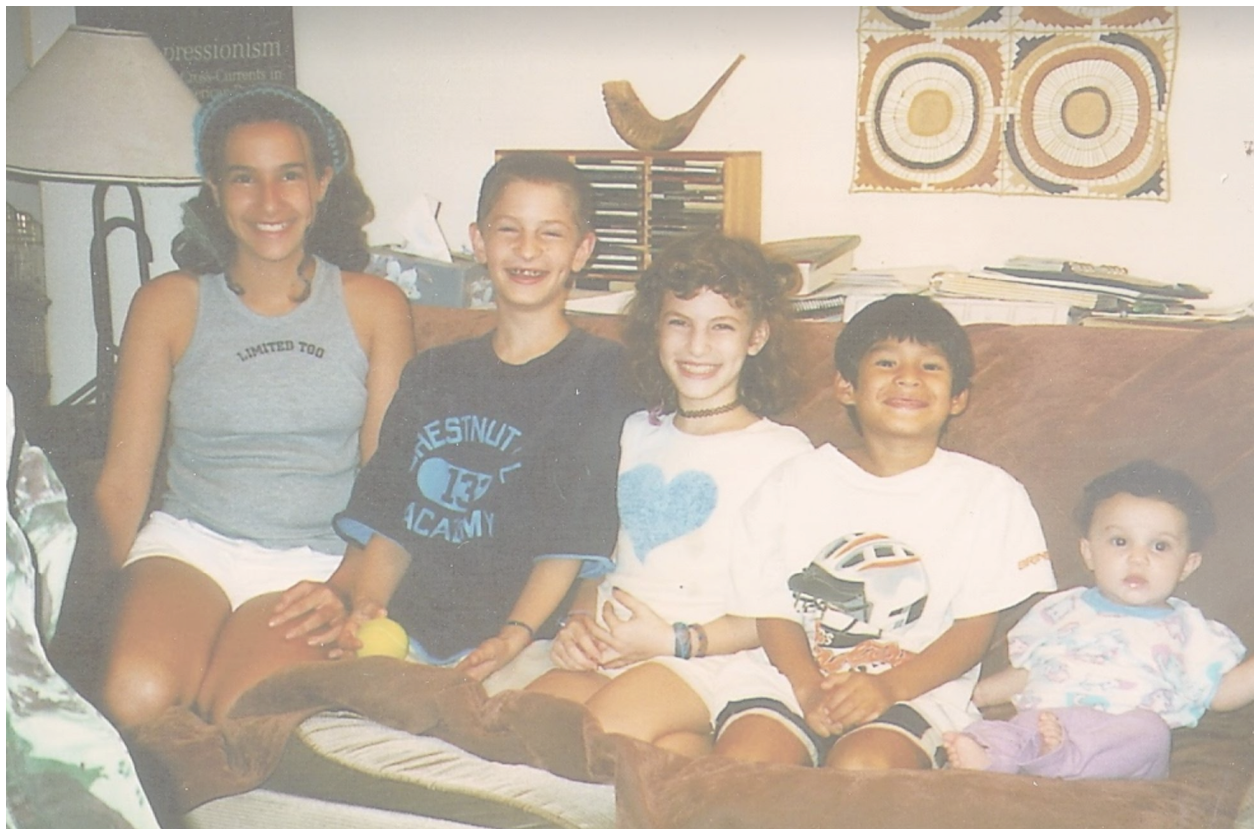
oldest, I often felt like I was the 'proof of concept' and that I had to be perfect to show that our family was legitimate. I felt I had to support my mom no matter what.

For example, one day at the Hair Cuttery. I'm seven years old, sitting in the haircutter's chair with the apron all wrapped around me, and the stylist is holding the first lock of my long brown hair with the scissors poised over it and she says "Are you sure you want me to cut this all off?"

I don't at all. What I want is to scream and run away, but I look in the mirror over my shoulder and see my mom wrangling my two younger siblings. We have lice, and my mom told me that I cannot tell the hair people, because if I do they'll kick us out and we'll miss another day of school and my mom will miss another day of work and even at seven I know we can't afford that.

So I steel my brown eyes in the mirror and say 'yes, please cut it all off.' And with each lock that falls limply to the ground I feel my truth slipping further and further from me. And the weight of being what others want me to be sitting on my shoulders like that black hair cutterly wrap.

That's just one instance of many in which I silenced my own voice and desires to support other people. That's been a lifelong challenge, involving bouts of deep depression that result from decades of stifling and isolation.



But long before I found my voice for myself, I learned that I could use it for others, specifically through my art.

Around that time, my mom and I would walk the few blocks to my school holding hands, pushing a sibling or two in a stroller, and every few feet we'd have to step around piles of dog poop on the sidewalk. I thought this was disgusting, and I was eight-year-old-outraged at all these adults who clearly didn't know how to behave. "Mom this is disgusting!" I'd say.

"Why don't you do something about it?" She asked.

"Me? What can I do? I'm just a kid."

So one day after our walk home, she hands me a stack of index cards, some popsicle sticks, some glue and a set of really nice markers. To make signs. I write 'curb your dog' in my to-this-day very neat handwriting and draw pictures of dogs and shovels. I glue them together and the next day, instead of holding her hand I run between piles of poop, sticking signs everywhere. Including a few in poo themselves, which at 8 I thought was hilarious.

Over the next weeks, the poop slowly started to disappear. I felt really powerful, like my art can make a difference! (Later I learned that my mom had called all around to the apartment buildings and actually done some organizing).

Again that's just one instance, but throughout my childhood and high school years, it was art that gave voice to my feelings before my words ever could. And I knew that to everyone there was more to the story than was visible on the outside.

Hearing in Hebrew School that "there's something bad happening in Israel that we can't talk about" hit that sense of 'more to the story', and in college, I began studying Arabic. To learn more, I traveled to the West Bank to live with a host family in a refugee camp. The pressure of living under occupation was intense - the whole family pacing the living room at 2pm every day, wondering if our host mother would come home or be arrested by soldiers that day. I couldn't change the situation, but what I had was my art, so when the father of the family asked me to paint a mural for them, I readily agreed.

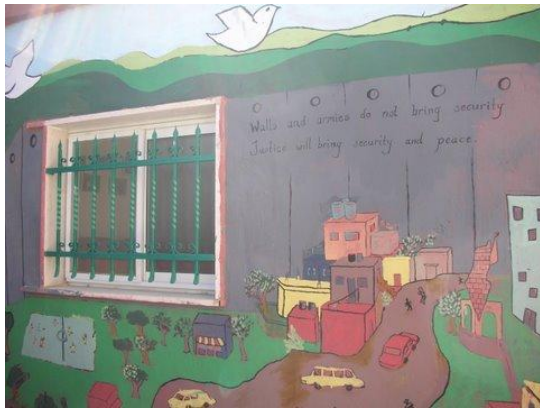
I go outside and begin painting the wall white to prep it. A little boy comes up and pulls on my shirt. "Miss, miss, biddee ursum!" he says. "I want to draw." So - why not - I hand him a paintbrush. And then the next kid: biddee ursum! Another paintbrush to him. Soon there are so many kids I run out of paintbrushes. Together we paint a mural of their grandparents' villages, where they were exiled from in 1948, with the names of all the villages memorialized in the clouds. Together we re-create the truth on their walls, sharing what has been silenced.



We create a mural arts camp and paint 25 murals throughout the refugee camp together the following summer. And I return to my Jewish community and share the artwork, standing in front of them, trembling, because most of them disagree with me, but this matters.

I began to get the sense that I could speak up. That being silent or being what other people wanted was no longer going to work. That the difference between the inside emotions and the outside pleasantries was not going to create the world I wanted to live in.





When I sat down in Public Narrative class for the first time, I felt the invitation to bring what was inside, out. Finally. But I'd been hiding it so long that I didn't know how. My Teaching Fellow leans over the table at Starbucks, her gorgeous curly brown hair boldly spilling over her flowered dress, and she says "but where does your empathy come from?" I tremble under her piercing, loving, "I see through you" gaze and whisper "maybe it's genetic?" And proceed to tell her all about my mother. Of course that doesn't fly, and I think it's because I couldn't answer that question that I got hooked.

For the first time someone was asking *my* story, and it was up to me to author it.

That freedom - and that intensity - was so powerful that I dove in, kept exploring my own story, and began offering that invitation to others. Seeing the light in my eyes and others eyes as we discover agency we didn't know we had... it's magical.

Two years ago, in a deep bout of depression, I began to draw what I felt. One drawing turned into another and soon I had a fully illustrated story of my journey with my inner critic, with my silences, and with the slow process of finding my voice. Again it was my art that spoke my story,

but this time it was in words too. I now share that story with groups to help others combat their inner critique.

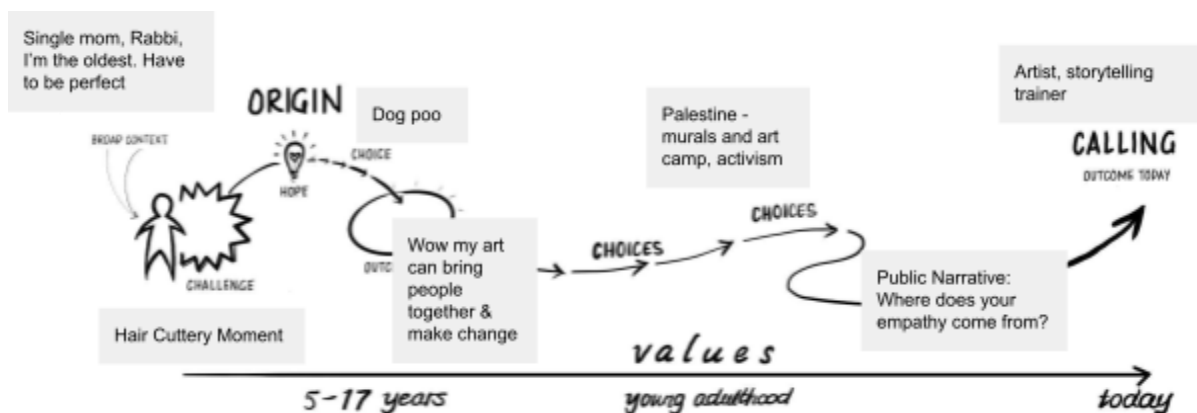
It's been six years since that first day at Starbucks and I live this craft, continuing to dive into the questions, crafting and recrafting my story, becoming me through the narratives I tell about my life.

And so I am an artist, a storytelling trainer, and a leadership development facilitator, to help people see ourselves in deeper ways, tell our hidden truths, and join together in connected community.

So that's my story - or the current version at least as of this writing.

First notice what it feels like for you to read this. What's it like to read someone's personal story in an otherwise 'academic' piece? Does it make you trust me more? Less? How does it affect your willingness to learn from me?

You might notice the story structure there:



Notice a few things:

Notice how I tell the story in moments. I could tell you *about* a moment, like "Once my family had lice and I had to tell the hair cutter I wanted all my hair cut off even though I didn't." or I could tell you just generalities, like "I used to stifle my own voice when I thought I had to protect my mom." But that's not nearly as powerful as you being able to see that little kid in the hair cutter's chair. Through moments, you join me in the emotions of the story, and understand my affective experience, not just the meaning I made of it after.

Moments are created from vivid detail, but details alone don't make a moment. Notice how the moments I tell are not static descriptions of everything that was around me, they're more like little movies where something happens. It's like I take your hand and walk with you through my life. It's like a play, not just the headlines.

Notice how the story includes both moments of hurt and moments of hope. Without some experience of hurt, I wouldn't think the world needed changing. But without an experience of hope and agency, I wouldn't think I could change it. We need to hear both in a story, as we'll get into more below.

Notice how this is still a work in progress. You might think about which elements could be stronger. Where would you coach this story?

## Coaching

We are all fish in the water of our own stories. We need others – coaches, in this case – to help us see the water we swim in. Coaches enable leadership through strategic questions that support the coachee to find their own answers. Coaches model leadership for their coachees, guide them through the learning process, and support and challenge them to develop their stories through strategic questions.

There are many types of coaching, including organizing coaching, sports coaching, relationships coaching, life coaching, etc, all with the goal of supporting someone to grow in a way they want to. Coaching is a blend of provoking, evoking, teaching, mentoring, challenging, supporting, guiding, cheerleading, learning-with, learning-from, resonating, and exploring. It is no one of these things alone. While the craft and practices of coaching are relatively similar across different types of coaching, the content and focus of the coaching can differ.

Public Narrative Coaching takes the Public Narrative and the Leadership of the learner as its primary content. That is to say, our cheerleading, provoking, evoking, etc etc etc is all in the service of supporting our coachees to deepen their leadership practice through telling powerful authentic stories of self, us, and now, based in values and used in the service of organizing. Your SuperCoaches will take as their primary content your learning and leadership, and their coaching will focus on that as they model the craft of coaching.

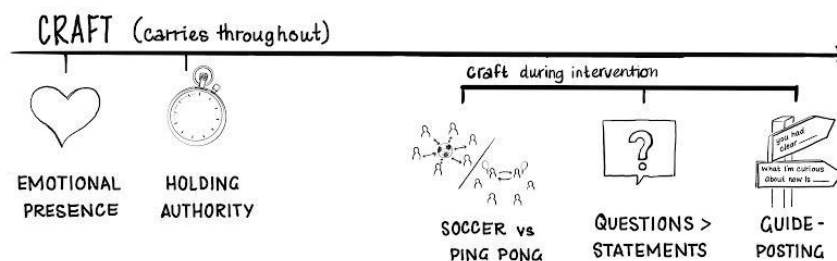
# Coaching Overview

This section is excerpted from the Public Narrative Coaching Training Manual I wrote last year.

**The Coaching Cycle:** Coaches begin by listening, then diagnose where they want to go, then intervene to go there.

1. **Observe:** Coaching begins with listening and observation. What is the storyteller saying? What specific words are they using? Notice emotion, vulnerability. Notice whether they share specific moments or more vague overviews. Notice what lands in you, and when you connect with them, and what doesn't / you don't. Just notice.
2. **Diagnose:** What elements do you hear in the story? What don't you hear, that could make the story stronger? This depends on which story you are coaching (self, us, now, linking) and is where you develop a strategy for your intervention.
3. **Intervene:** The intervention is really a three-step process, done often in 3 minutes in a workshop setting, and this is where much of the craft comes in – we call this 'the coaching process'
  - a. Pluses: Lift up what worked in their story
  - b. Deltas: Ask questions to dive into an element of the story that could be improved
  - c. Wrap up: Summarize what they should take away from the coaching in their next draft.

**The craft of coaching** is the 'how' to the 'what' of the above. It is the same for Self, Us, Now, and Linking, and is where the art of it all comes together. The elements of craft are: Questions vs statements, guideposting, emotional presence, holding authority, and soccer vs ping pong. Holding authority and emotional presence are constant throughout the coaching process, and questions vs statements, guideposting, and soccer vs ping pong come in during the intervention phase only.



**Emotional Presence:** Emotional presence begins with the coach modelling vulnerability in their own story. Then, when coaching, coaches must create empathetic tension through body language, eye contact, repeating back/mirroring, and pacing of questions. Balancing both rapid-fire questions and spaciousness is a key element of coaching with emotional presence. Coaches should take care not to be overly friendly or overly cold, but rather maintain a supportive and challenging space. Noticing and engaging emotional vulnerability in participants is a key component to a coach's emotional presence. When emotion arises, lean in, recognize it, and hold it, rather than backing away or minimizing it.

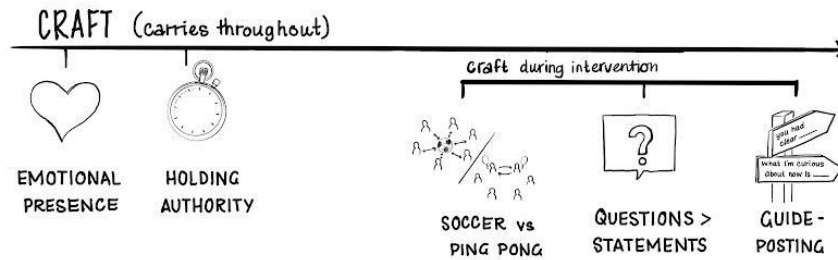
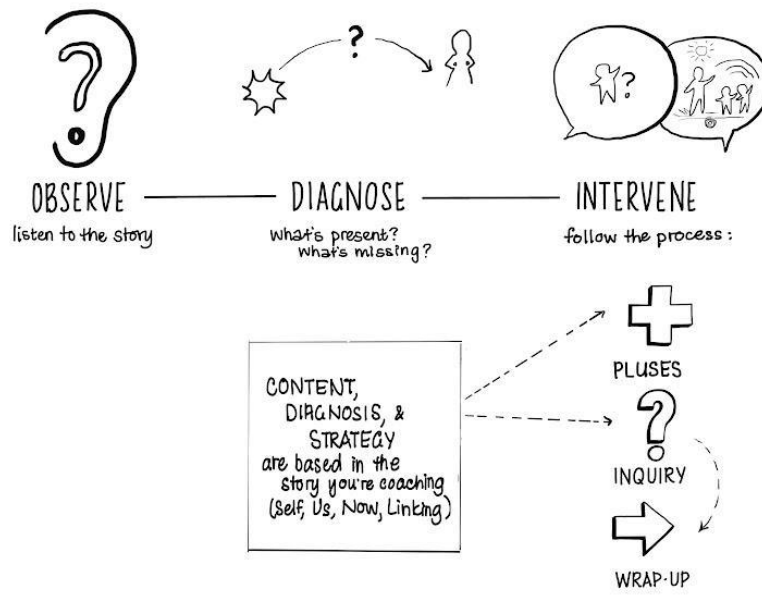
**Holding Authority:** Coaches must engage tight leadership around timing and focus without seeming tentative or too rushed. At times you will have to interrupt participants; do so with warmth, intention and with authority. It helps to name up front that your role as coach is to challenge and support the participants in their learning, so they know what to expect. Let them know upfront you will be “lovingly interrupting” them to help them focus and develop their stories. Maintain strict time management, and if someone or something is derailing the learning of the group (intentionally or otherwise), take the reins and deal with it. Remember you are responsible for facilitating the learning of the whole group. Hold your coachees accountable in the moment for questions you ask! (There is a tendency for learners to say “I’ll think about that” but encourage them to think now, in the moment: keep them on the hook -- it’s what they’re there for!)

**Soccer vs. Ping Pong:** “Soccer” means facilitating a group conversation, while “ping pong” is one-on-one back-and-forth with the coachee. Soccer can be a helpful way to allow the group to offer specific points of resonance or questions for the coachee, and to start engaging the group in coaching one another. Be very clear with your questions to the group to use your ‘soccer’ time most efficiently. Ping pong can be a helpful way to dive deeper into an element of a story or a point of vulnerability with the storyteller, and to model one-on-one coaching for the group. Coaches should make strategic choices about when to engage in soccer and ping pong throughout a coaching session.

**Questions vs. Statements:** *Why are questions important? What do questions do for the coachee that statements can’t? How might you as a coach strategically use questions to your advantage?* Coaching largely happens through asking questions, as the majority of the answers lie within the coachee, not the coach. Questions should be direct, to the point, and open-ended whenever possible. Don’t be afraid to just ask about what you’re really curious about, and trust your natural intuition. At times a coach may choose to make statements to make correctional interventions around an informational challenge, but statements should be a strategic choice rather than the default.

**Guideposting:** *We’ve talked about questions and statements, and now we’re going to talk about guideposting.* Let the coachee know where you’re going before you go there. Be explicit about what you are intervening on by “guideposting,” or naming the elements of the story using the language of the craft. For example, you might say “I hear a strong *challenge* in your story when you faced X, but I’m not sure of the *choice* you made,” and then direct all your coaching around the element of choice. Taking good notes during the narrative will help you have a clear strategy to guidepost around. When coaching a small group, you can be strategic about the elements you’re coaching in each story, so that the group gets a larger overall picture of the craft. Guideposts in time is also very important. In Story of Self, for example, if you say “when’s the first time you chose to work on community?” you’ll likely get something in their twenties, based in work life. If you say “when’s the first time as a kid that you felt community?” you’ll get something in their childhood. Make sure to be explicit about what time period in their life you are asking about.

The full coaching process:



## Coaching to Moments

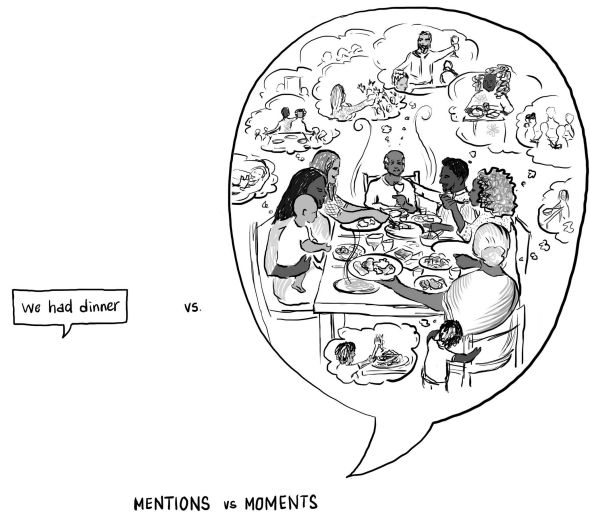
Strong stories are made up of moments. It is in the moments of our lives that we actually feel emotions, and emotions are what show us what we value (moment - emotion - motion, all share the same root: that which moves us). The moment is the unit of storytelling.

One key element of coaching is enabling storytellers to experience and tell stories in moments.

Some helpful questions can be:  
(the order is important, the exact question is not - and you shouldn't ask ALL the questions in each category, just the ones that feel natural)

- Choose one moment that feels the most powerful - let's dive into it in present tense
- DETAILS:
  - Where are you?
  - What do you see around you (in that moment)? What else?
  - Who's there with you?
    - What's their name? What do they look like? What are they doing?
- FEELING:
  - How do you feel?
  - What was it like for you?
- ACTION:
  - What happens? What did you do?
  - And then what happens next? And then what?
  - How'd you feel then?
- MEANING:
  - What did you learn about yourself from that?
  - What values did you learn from this moment?

Notice that we start with the setting – the place, the visual details, the people. Once you can picture the moment, only then ask about feelings. If you ask about feelings before getting a full, experiential sense of place, it is likely that the storyteller will go into their head, or intellectualize how they were feeling, rather than really feel it. Again, it is in moments that we feel emotions, so invite them into the moment and then invite the feelings (they'll probably be there anyways). Just be careful not to ask about feeling too soon. After they feel it, sense it, experience it, and have shared a dynamic moment, then you can ask about the meaning-making. Again, if you ask about this before the other parts, you'll take them to the abstract rather than the specific.



# Story Shapes

So let's talk about coaching. When coaching, we listen to a story, diagnose what's present and what's missing, and then intervene by uplifting what's strong and using questions to bring out what's unclear or missing. The following framework is intended to support diagnosis and intervention, particularly for early-career coaches.

I've been reflecting on a few particular ways stories are told, which I'm calling "story shapes". A 'story shape' is a snapshot of the general outline of a story, with certain elements present and others missing.

There are a few main story shapes I've found for story of self:

- "I've been hurt and I've had hope and I've chosen this calling" → Complete narrative
- "Everything was awful and now I fix it": Challenge → Outcome, no hope
- "Everything was awful, someone cared for me, and now I fix it": Challenge + Hope → No Choice
- "Everything was great and now I give back": Hope → Outcome, no challenge
- A few others:
  - "Here's a lot of stuff I did": Resume story
  - "My mom was an amazing person and taught me my values": Story of Other
  - "This thing happened to me": Moment unrelated to leadership

I identify these story shapes to help new coaches diagnose what's missing in a story and coach there. When you can identify which 'shape' is the story you're hearing, you can have a coaching path at the ready, and dive right in.

Story shapes are also useful because we often find that what's missing in a story is indicative of what's missing in someone's self-view, or their own narration of their lives (Noorulain Masood, fellow Public Narrative coach and trainer, brought this to my attention). Coaching this element of a story is more than just coaching a story, it is coaching a person and their understanding of their life.

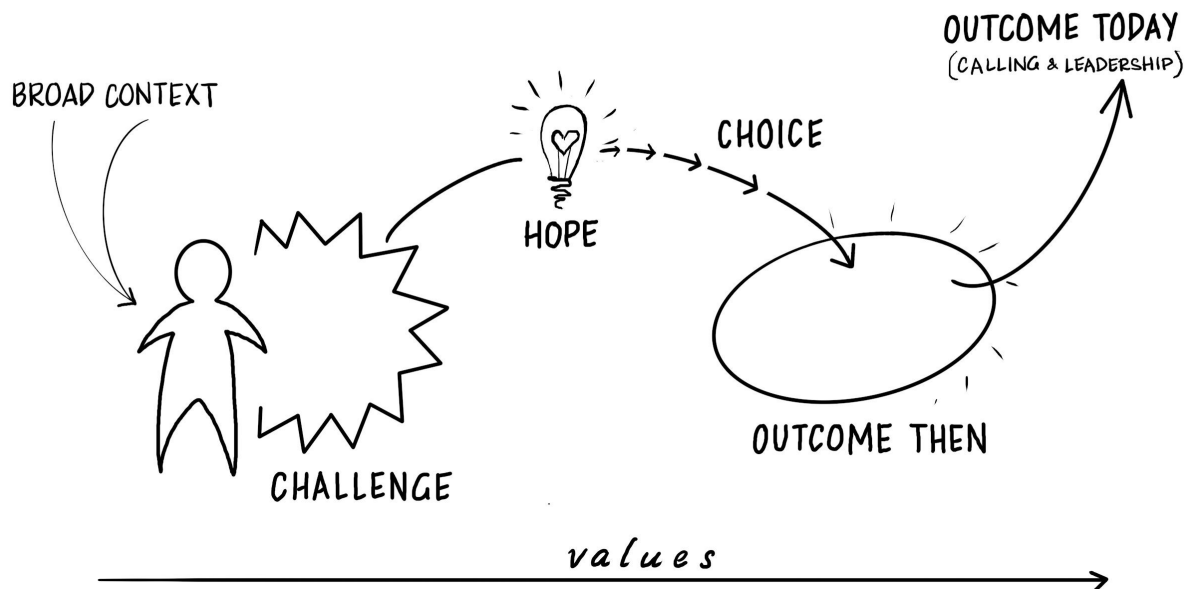
There's great healing power in our ability to complexify our storylines and hold all of our truth without hiding one side of that binary from ourselves (see the work of Michael White in Narrative Therapy). When we tell a story of only challenge or only hope, we are upholding a binary view of life. With strong coaching, we can overcome such binary thinking and hold two existing truths at the same time, for example "I didn't have the love that I needed, and people loved me." And, if we can do that in our own stories, there is a key skill built for our ability to hold complexity and multiple conflicting truths in our leadership in the broader world. Coaching the missing element of one of those story shapes is coaching the person themselves, and may even affect the structure of their thinking. I think this is where those 'aha' moments come from.



Thus I have found it incredibly powerful to coach the part of the story that is hidden or missing in the first presentation of story.

“I’ve had hurt and I’ve had hope early on, and I’ve chosen this calling”

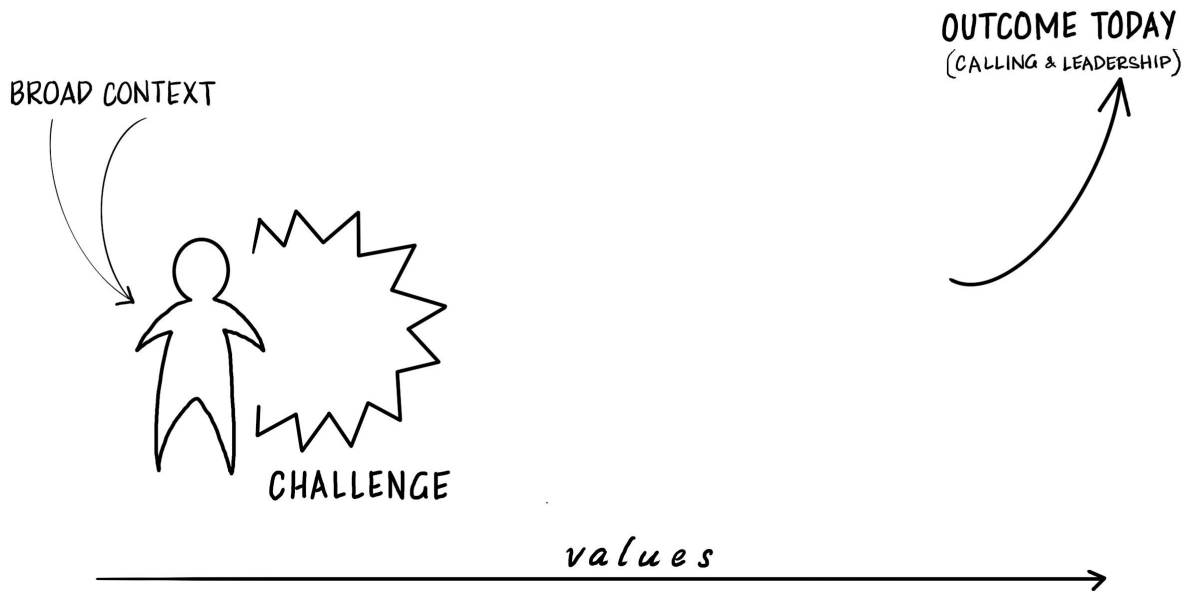
(as seen above)



This is a complete narrative. It starts in the origin years, sharing the moments of hope and moments of hurt, early agency, that lead to the person’s leadership today. Within the moments, we can see vivid details, as if watching a play rather than reading a review of it. We *feel* the storyteller’s authentic emotion as they tell it, and we feel our own emotions mirroring theirs as we listen. There is a clear values thread told in the story that connects to their leadership.

As a coach, if you hear this story shape, you may uplift and teach from it to let the group know that it was a powerful story. You might emphasize how it helps the listeners understand the storyteller and their calling. You may also find places to coach within it, for example coaching to more particulars of a challenge, hope or choice moment. You can go with your innate curiosity and what would help you understand them more as a leader or a person.

“Everything was Awful and Now I fix it”



This story shape contains a lot of early challenge, which the person is now working to ensure that no one else has to face. This is a common story shape among frontline activists, many of whom experienced extremely difficult circumstances that sparked their interest in a particular area of work.

So what's missing? Why is that important?

This story is missing the possibility of anything different. Where did this person learn that something other than challenge was possible? Where did this person see models of solidarity, hope, connection, or kindness? Where did this person get the inner strength to lead? I believe that this strength comes from love and a sense of possibility, even if it feels like those moments were few and far between. Immediate family life may have not had any semblance of kindness, but sometimes the kindness of a teacher, extended family member, or friend actually stood out among the rest because it was such a rarity. I've seen people break into grateful tears as they recall the kindness of a second grade teacher who bought them a winter coat. Or the hug of a soccer coach who whispered "you're a good kid" into their ear. Sometimes a space or practice, even if done alone, meant all the world to them. I've heard beautiful stories about a five year old talking to the baby pigs in the pigsty on a remote farm when there was no adult to listen, or the magical safety of a treehouse and a sketchbook. Often the storyteller is carrying that light without even knowing it, and often these relate strongly to their leadership. What's beautiful is that they're actively passing on that light as well, often without seeing the power they carry, and sometimes without seeing themselves as a leader in the first place.

As coaches, we can coach to find out where this person got a glimmer of hope, and how they've brought (and bring!) that light to others.

First, start with their leadership today. What do they want to create in the world, or what is their calling? Even if they're not sure, a few words here can be really helpful. If they share a job title, ask what it's really about for them. A basic understanding of their leadership today will help ground all of your coaching in leadership. After all, the stories we are telling in Public Narrative are not just random stories, but stories about the moments we learned the values that lead to our calling. So we need to know our coachee's calling (or their best estimate of that lifelong question at this moment in time).

Next, explore where they felt the possibility of that calling. We already heard the hard moments in which they came to believe that working towards their calling was necessary. For example, if they are called to help people find their voice, in this story shape we have heard when they experienced voicelessness. But when did they learn that they COULD have a voice, or that they could support others to do so? If all they experienced was voicelessness, how did they learn that voice-full-ness was even a thing? So we ask questions about when they experienced their calling early on (though in the language of their story, not the technical terms I'm using here.) For example, we might ask "when did you NOT feel voiceless early on?" "When DID your voice matter?"

You can also ask WHO questions. "Who treated you in a way that you felt your voice mattered?" Many people who experienced a lot of trauma in their families will say "no one" and need to be reminded at this point that we're not just asking about the family – maybe a teacher, a coach, a friend? Or maybe there was a place where it felt like their voice mattered, even if not with other people, like they made art, or graffiti, or sang. It's important get to a specific person or place.

Now that you have a specific person or place, guide them to find a specific memory – a moment. Ask for *one time* when they really felt that support. Draw out details! Ask them to close their eyes and picture it. Ask them for sensory details first: what did they see? What did the person say? What did the person do?

Only AFTER you have the full picture, ask how they felt. Once they are in the moment, they can recall the feelings. Again, if you ask for feelings before they are mentally in the scene, they will give you an intellectual response about feelings, because feelings happen in the moment. When they're mentally in the moment, they can go there emotionally too, and will likely actually feel the feelings in the present as they recall the story. Recalling this memory can be a very powerful experience for people, many of whom have not recalled it for years, and may never have ascribed meaning to it. Let them really feel it. Linger here.

Then pivot to how they carried that forward for others, early on, for the first time. It's not just hope that's important, but their own agency, how THEY took it on and embody that hope going forward. To coach to agency, ask when was the first time they were that person for others. Or when was the first time they brought that feeling to others. Again, coach to a moment.

Here it's important to guidepost in time. If you ask generally "how do you carry that forward for others?" you'll likely get something more in the present. If you ask "when's the first time you offered that to others?" you'll get something in their earlier life. Be strategic about what you are looking for, and craft the wording of your question accordingly.

Lastly, ask how this moment carries on in their lives and work today. Have them make the connection. As they do, emphasize the element of choice. We often overlook our own agency, or attribute our choices to happenstance. It can be very powerful to reflect back to our coachees that they were making active choices every step of the way, choosing to shine their light in the world. They didn't have to, they chose to! You are mirroring back the truth that they are this person for others now, and this can be a powerful aha moment. Be confident in your mirroring.

To wrap up, ask them what they are taking away from your coaching. This is most powerful as a question, but you can also just remind them of what to include in their story from the coaching. If you have time (this will never happen in a workshop setting but is possible in 1:1 coaching) you could have them tell their whole story again, incorporating this moment into it.

Here's a cheat sheet bullet-point version of all this:

#### Coaching to Hope:

1. **Get to outcome – what do you do today / what's your calling? Find what they're fighting against / fighting for.**
  - a. Confirm the value or feeling they want to create in the world
2. **Take the main challenge, or main thing they're fighting against, and flip it, focusing on the feeling or value they're fighting for:** "When did you not feel [the challenge]?" or "When were moments when you felt [the positive opposite]?"
  - a. Ex: They've been silenced and now help others find voice. "When in your early life did you not feel silenced?" / "where did your voice matter, early on, to whom?"
  - b. Ex: They've been excluded and now help others find belonging. "When early on did you feel included?" / "Tell me about a time you felt like you belonged."
  - c. If they say 'never', ask 'were there any spaces, maybe not in your family, but maybe in school, or in a faith community, or service workers, who showed you that [value] was possible?'
    - i. Where did you go to breathe? Where did you go to get strength to carry on?
3. **Ask WHO (if it's not clear already) and get a general sense of what they did to create the feeling:** "who was it that \_\_\_?" "What did they do?"
  - a. Ex: "Who was it that didn't make you feel silenced?" "What would your aunt do?"

- b. Ex: “Who was it that showed you you belonged?” “Ah, Your teacher. How did your teacher show you you belonged?” / “How did you know you belonged with your teacher?” “What was their name?”
  - c. Note: there may not have been anyone, and in that case you can ask where they felt that, were there places or activities that made them feel that way. I’ve heard beautiful stories about a treehouse, pigs in a pigsty, drawing, sitting by a tree...If talking about a space/practice: “What would you do there?” “When would you go?” etc
  - d. **If it was a person, get their name, and use it throughout the rest of the session.**
4. **Get a specific moment:** “When’s one time you remember?”
- a. Ex: “Do you remember a specific time with your aunt?”
  - b. Ex: “When’s a specific time your teacher really showed you that?”
5. **Draw out details!**
- a. You may need to interrupt with questions to get specific: Where were you? Where were you standing? What did they look like? What did they say?
  - b. You might invite them to tell it in present tense.
6. **Ask for the feeling.** “How did that feel for you?”
- a. Only move to this when you can feel the moment, and you see them re-experiencing the moment as they tell you.
  - b. **Honor the feeling to reinforce it. Let them sit with it a minute. Let them feel it.**
    - i. If it feels appropriate, you could ask what it meant to them, or what it was in them that the person may have seen. You could also point out how much that person must have seen in them or believed in them (they probably didn’t do that for everyone). The goal here is agency, and personal self-worth. It’s not about the other person being charitable but about the inherent worth of the coachee.
    - ii. You might also find a few other similar moments when they felt that way, making it more of a pattern.
7. **Pivot to how it lives within them in their lives, either then (agency) or now (outcome).**
- a. AGENCY:
    - i. “I get the sense that you are [name] for others now. When’s the first time you were that for someone else?”
    - ii. “When’s the first time you created that feeling for someone else?”
    - iii. “Who’s someone around that time who might’ve seen you like you see [name]?”
    - iv. “So what did you do with that [love/hope/belief in you] back then?”

- v. Note that all these questions are BACK in their history, not the present. Make sure you are “timestamping” your questions to get to the period of time that you want to.

b. OUTCOME:

- i. “How do you create that same feeling for others now?”
- ii. “Who’s someone who sees you in the same way you see [name]?”
- iii. “How does this relate to what you do today?”

- c. Note: If you have time, begin with the first time they offered it to others, and then move forward in time to their present calling. Flesh out moments of choice when they stepped up to enable others, following in the footsteps of this person. Name the element of choice - this wasn’t just happenstance.
- d. It’s not about the other person at all, really, it’s about the coachee and what they offer to the world. Seeing themselves as valuable in the other person’s life and in their own eyes is the first step, but the way they offer it back out is the crucial piece for their own agency.

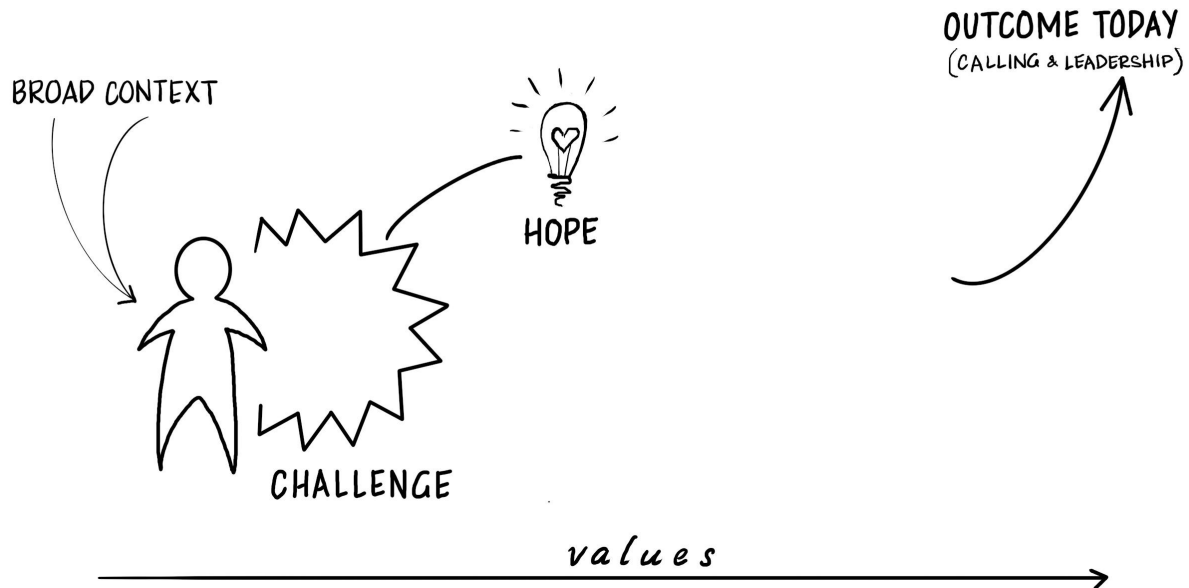
**8. Ask what they are taking away from the coaching.**

- a. “What will you include in your next round of story?”
- b. “What did you learn about yourself / your life from this?”
- c. “What does it mean to you to know that you are this person for others?”



Of course there are many other strategies – what do YOU think might work for this story shape? See if you can notice in your coaching or practice what strategies you take and what works for you.

“Everything was hard and someone was nice to me and now I seek to change the world”



This story has challenge and hope, but no agency. No sense of how the person themselves first made choices towards their calling. For many people, a sense of agency is missing in their lives in general – it feels like things happen to them, rather than them making active choices. This is a powerful frameshift, and one we can help guide through story.

As a coach, listen for the choices the storyteller made. Often they will be implicit, or hidden in the story. For example, a storyteller might say “Yeah, so when my mom was out, my aunt would take care of us, but sometimes she wouldn’t be there and I took care of my siblings.” And if you ask a little more about what they did, it’s like “Oh, well, I’d make up stories for my siblings so they wouldn’t be scared.” or “I took them on long walks in the woods and taught them to name all the trees.” Or whatever – those are choices! Even if they didn’t have a choice about the circumstances they did have a choice about how they responded to them. Highlighting that as a choice and mirroring it back can be very helpful.

Marshall sometimes says “Oh so did all of your 8 siblings also become neuro-biologists?” to highlight the fact that even in similar circumstances, different people go different ways – and that’s not just by happenstance! That’s a choice! Reflecting back these choices can help people see their lives in new ways, and notice things that were otherwise hidden to them.

New coaches often ask “so what was the choice you made?” and this can lead to blank looks or intellectualization, because often people don’t categorize their actions as choices. It can be more helpful to simply ask “so what did you do?”



Other helpful questions might be:

- So what did you do?
- When did you first [take action]?
- When did that [the hope or lessons that were infused in them] first become yours in a real way?
- Essentially starting at step 7 above, with early agency.

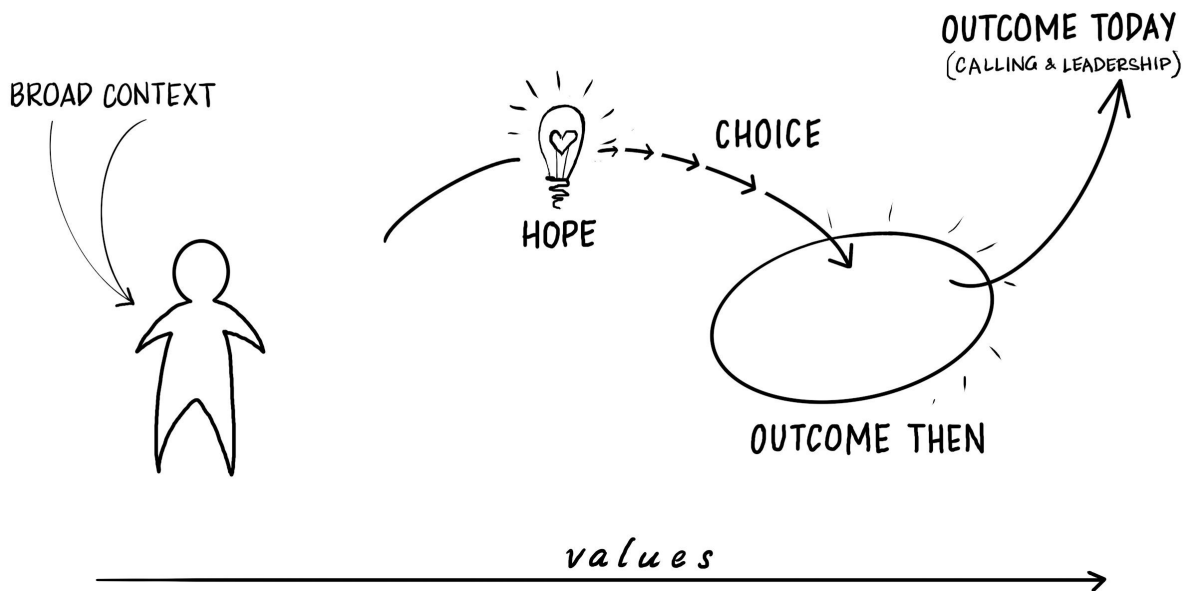
And then get to a story moment.

When coaching to agency, make sure to guidepost to certain time period. If you use words like “now” or “recently” or just leave out any time period guidance, you will likely get responses about choices they make in the present day. While that is a choice, in our framework it’s more of an outcome, because it’s about their current leadership. So words like “now” or no time-guideposting will likely lead to outcome.

If you want to elicit stories of the origins of their agency, include words like “first time,” “early on in life,” “when you were young,” etc to orient them in time.

Once you get them to a story moment of agency, you can later ask how that shows up in their leadership today.

“Everything was great and now I give back”



In this story shape, everything is all perfect for the storyteller, until they see something sad outside and desire to change it. It's more about charity than about resonating with their own pain, and often it's not very vulnerable.

I've noticed that white American middle- to upper-class cis-hetero folks tend to do the "everything was great and now I give back" more than those from more marginalized backgrounds. They've been taught that because they have privilege they cannot also have pain. At the moment, stories of intersectional traumas are rightfully gaining more attention to combat the lack of regard they've experienced for so many centuries. One side effect of this is that privileged people often feel they do not have their own story or do not have the right to tell it.

However, this is both false and problematic, because it again puts the emotional labor on non-privileged people, makes an 'us-them' binary (as privilege isn't actually binary!) and keeps the non-tellers out of their heart connection to their work.

Sometimes, the sense that one has to bury their own pain, keep it secret, or be ashamed of it is part of the challenge itself. When a privileged, mostly healthy family has a narrative that 'our family is healthy and everything is fine,' sometimes the not-fine feelings (loneliness, feeling lost, not belonging) get shoved under the rug. Other times, there are real challenges like alcoholism or family secrets that are not "okay" to share. This craft is NOT about getting people to share family secrets just for the sake of it, but it is about getting people to find what real challenges and hurt in their lives drew them to where they are today, and to why they care about changing something in the world.

It can be helpful to honor their sense of privilege, if they bring it up: “Thank you for sharing. I really appreciate your sensitivity to privilege and your awareness of power. And, it’s also okay to share even small moments of when you felt pain too, because everyone experiences it. It’s actually what helps us resonate with challenges we see outside of us and things that need to change. Being vulnerable about that actually helps connect, rather than distance from pain. So... [dive into coaching]”

Possible questions: start with choice. Don’t let them off the hook!

- Get to a moment when they made a choice to help someone else. Flesh out the moment, and then coach from there, aiming backwards in their life towards the origin of their own personal hurt:
  - In that moment, what did you imagine that person was feeling? Why did you empathize with them?
  - Did you recognize that feeling?
  - What moments in your life helped you recognize that feeling? Or: When in your life does that recognition come from? Or: When have you felt like that, even if in a very different context?
  - What was going on then for you? Get to a moment. They may try to minimize or make it positive, but see if you can stay with the challenge for a bit. Flesh out the moment (see: coaching to moments)
  - Were moments like that a pattern? See if it connects to a broader challenge in their life.
  - Ask the group: What’s it like to hear this from [storyteller]? What does it mean for your understanding of them and their leadership? (go to them first for a positive affirmation to avoid the storyteller having a shame reaction)
  - Ask the storyteller: How does this moment connect to what you do today? (likely they will never have associated it together) How does it feel to share it and see the response?

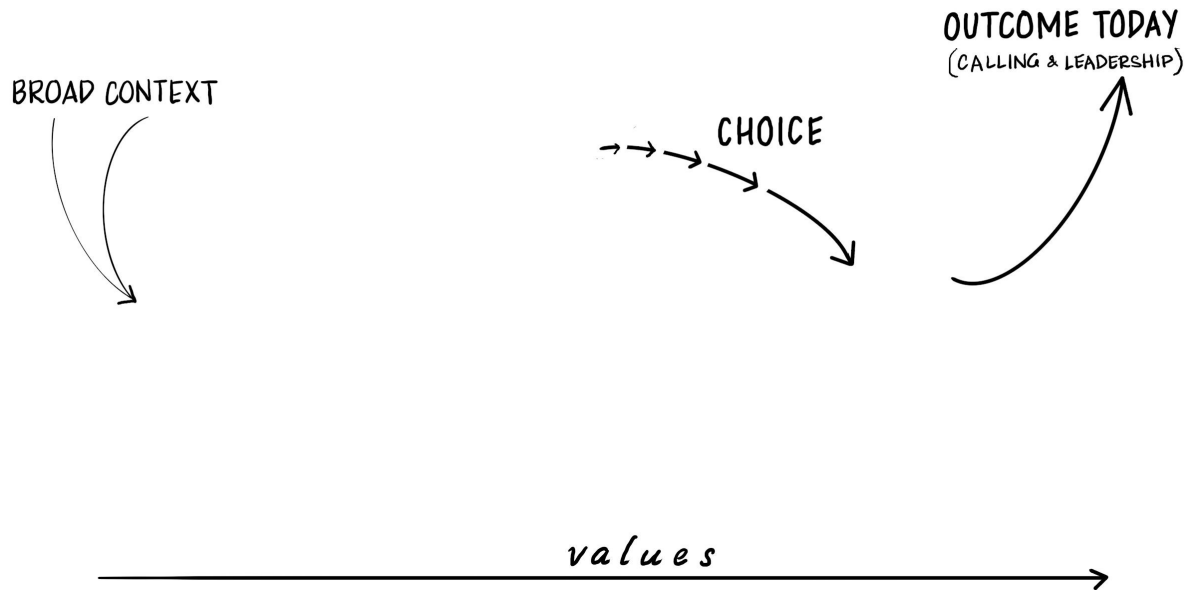
Other possible pathways:

- Not everyone who sees hard things out there in the world cares to change it. Why did you? Why / why / why...
- Why do you care? When did you start caring? When did you own it? Why did you do that?
- Faith tradition?
- Why does the pain of the world resonate with you?
- Why did you care? Why was that important to you? But why? (then get to a moment)

Of course there are many other strategies – what do YOU think might work for this story shape? See if you can notice in your coaching or practice what strategies you take and what works for you.

“Here’s a lot of stuff I did”

Resume Story



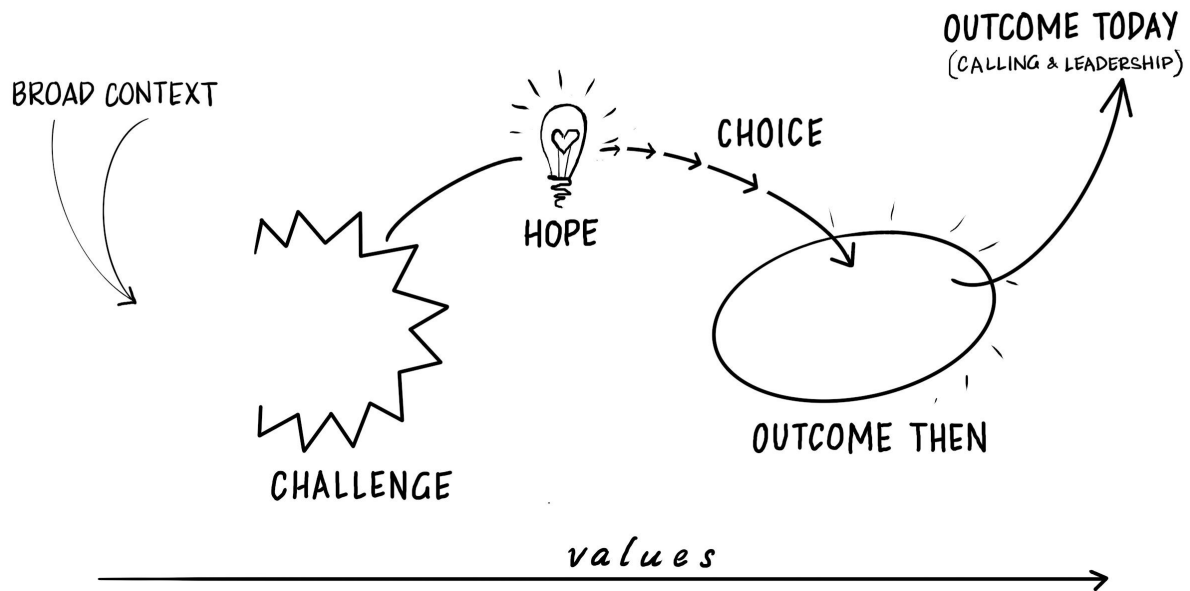
In this story shape, there are no moments. The storyteller offers broad context, a number of choices along the way, their ‘outcome’ or calling, and maybe some stated values, but nothing we can really see or grasp onto.

One coaching strategy here can be to take the value and ask “it seems like you really care about \_\_\_\_, is that right?” Once you have the value, you can go backwards in time:

- When’s the first time you really experienced the need for \_\_\_\_? (to challenge)
- When did you learn that \_\_\_\_ wasn’t always just a given? (to challenge)
- Was there a time when you didn’t have \_\_\_\_? (to challenge)
- When’s the first time you stood for \_\_\_\_? (to choice)
  - What was going on? (to challenge)
- Who first taught you about \_\_\_\_?

Of course there are many other strategies – what do YOU think might work for this story shape? See if you can notice in your coaching or practice what strategies you take and what works for you.

## “My Mom was Amazing and Taught me My Values”



This story may have a moment, and may connect to outcome, but it's not about the storyteller at all, it's a 'story of other.' Stories of Self need to be about the Self.

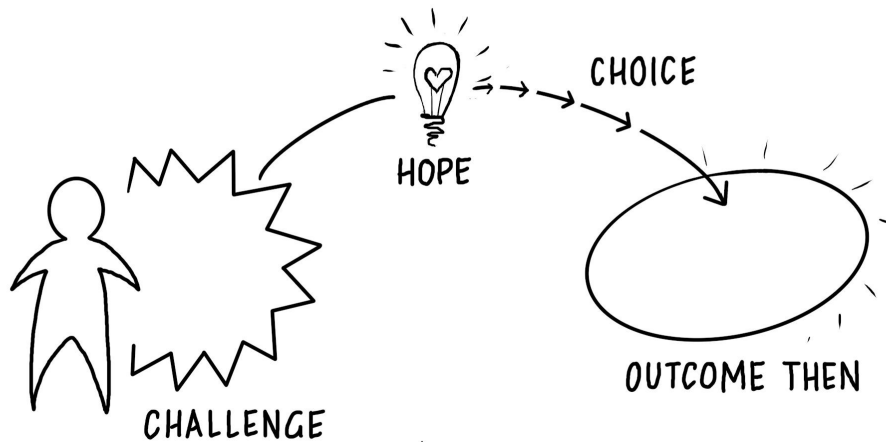
Name that this is more about [their mom, dad, whoever] than them. Do not be afraid to name it explicitly – it is very important that they be clear on this.

You could ask what their experience of those moments was like, to see them through the eyes of a child and understand what it felt like or meant to that kid at the time. Then ask when they first took on that value and enabled others in that same way, that is, when it became theirs and not someone else's.

Helpful questions here:

- I hear that you care about [value]. When did you first act on that yourself?
- When did this become yours, not [your mom's]?
- Not everyone who loves their mom follows in their footsteps or takes on their lessons. Why did you?
- When is a time you were proud of how you lived into that?
- What was YOUR experience of that? What did you feel seeing that?

## “This Thing Happened When I Was Little”



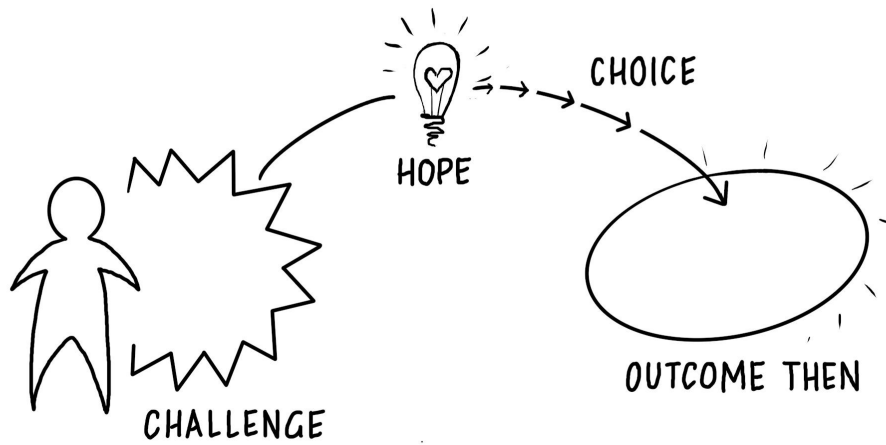
This story shape is a beautiful story, but has no apparent connection to what they do today, or to their leadership. It may have no clear value either.

If you're not sure, you might ask:

- “How does this relate to what you do today?”
- “Why did you choose to tell this story?”

If there's still no connection, you might need to re-explain the point of Story of Self.

“This Thing Happened Well After I was 18”



This story might be about a recent work pivot, or a choice as a parent, but is not about the ORIGIN of their values. Here, you might pull out a value, and ask for when they first learned that was important, early on in life.

# Conclusion

Story Shapes can help us easily identify what is present and what is unsaid in a Public Narrative Story of Self. As coaches, we can use these patterns to strategically choose the most impactful intervention to make with our coachees. Each shape is a snapshot of the story at that particular moment in time, and can provide a possible map for the pathway into more depth. There is no one pathway or 'right' way to coach each story or each story shape. The questions you ask as a coach will be in the moment, based in your own natural curiosity and the words of the storyteller, based in the interaction and relationship between you two. As you go off into your coaching journey, I offer again the reminder to be as human as you possibly can be. Know that patterns and maps and frames are just ways to orient our thinking, but cannot possibly capture the complexity of life, or the human that sits in front of us in the coaching encounter. Let these words be simply a support to you, but the real invitation is to bring the craft in as a structure to your heart, your connection, and your emotion. May we all get better at being human, together.

Here's to the stories told, and those left untold. Thank you for your leadership.

Rosi

## Resources:

Ganz, Marshall. "Why Stories Matter." Sojourners Magazine. March 2009.

White, M. (2007). Maps of narrative practice. WW Norton.