Smart CSOs Storytelling Workshop Report
29-30 November 2012 in Cologne
**Context of the workshop:**

In order to tackle our global ecological and social crises, we need a cultural transformation away from consumerism and nationalism and towards a culture of wellbeing with simpler living and a sense of planetary identity. One of the key aims of the Smart CSOs Lab is to learn how civil society can develop effective strategies to enable such a cultural transformation for the Great Transition (a new narrative).

As we know from previous discussions in the lab, CSO campaigns that rely too heavily on the rational argument (the facts), fail to have the level of impact required for a deep transformation in our political, social and human systems. In order to contribute effectively to the creation of a new societal narrative, we need to tap into the creative world of mythmaking. As Gus Speth said once: “It is the age of poets, philosophers and psychologists not the scientists and policywonks who need to bring people on board.”

Using the experience from his work at Free Range Studios, Jonah Sachs has developed a proven methodology to help campaigns tell great stories and become effective mythmakers. In this workshop we applied his approach to our context and explored how to develop effective stories for the Great Transition.

**Objectives of the workshop:**

- Learn a methodology for developing better stories for our current (or new campaigns) to more effectively contribute to the Great Transition (GT).
- Draft a new set of messaging guidelines and story strategies for how we communicate about the Great Transition. These guidelines will help diverse campaigners test whether their own communications are contributing to the larger narrative of the Great Transition.
- Ideate a series of draft stories that we can build on and can start experimenting with in our campaigns.

**Expectations from participants**

At the very beginning, the expectations of the participants were harvested. Among them were:

- To learn how to empower the disoriented citizen;
- Policy-making is a rational, left-brain oriented process. Looking for right brain strategies, a new way of thinking;
- To see how to combine the Great Transition with daily work;
- Get acquainted with new tools for story telling.

**Jonah’s introduction into his storytelling approach (Winning the Story Wars)**

Jonah started his talk by pointing out that this storytelling workshop requires a lot of creativity. He invited the participants to leave their rational side a bit, relax and most importantly have fun, as this is the way to reach a creative state of mind. He said that the workshop would provide the participants with a methodology to create campaigns based on storytelling and to develop more emotional, more evocative and more consistent campaigns. The workshop was also about starting
to collaborate on the GT brand together and to check out if our organisations are participating or not in the creation of that larger story. At the end of the workshop we would have some seeds of the ‘public myth’ of the GT brand.

Jonah then gave us a sense of today’s landscape: The world of communications is changing and we as communicators are not changing fast enough. He outlined three phases or eras of communications:

- Oral tradition; the “fittest survive”, audiences *co-create* stories, only the best are transmitted from generation to generation
- Broadcast era: the “richest” survive; the audiences *consume*. TV/ billboard renting is key to reach millions. (We still mainly talk to people the “broadcast era” way)
- Digitoral era: A digitally empowered return to the Oral tradition. stories, survival of the fittest. Information comes from friends, family, people one trusts.

In this new context, brands need to be a story. Open, inclusive narrative. While in the broadcast era stories tended to tell us that either “you are part of the story” or “you will suffer the consequences” (inadequacy marketing), in the digitoral era, connecting to the higher values of the audiences is a must (empowerment marketing).

- How are grand myths made? Myths need to provide audiences with: 1) An explanation; 2) A meaning; 3) A story, and 4) Rituals. These elements are essential ingredients for myths in societies.
- The hero’s journey (J. Campbell) is key to story development. The hero is usually a helpless outsider living in a broken world; the mentor is powerful creates a personal connection to the hero and gives a gift, a great treasure, something the hero can use to on her quest to heal the world. To be a hero is to embark onto a journey towards adulthood. The values are always at the core of the story and the moral of the story is placed strategically.
- In order to be successful, our stories need to be oriented to our audiences in an empathetic way that casts *them* as the heroes. We (Civil Society) can see ourselves as the mentors who need to give them a magic gift. The main challenge to be overcome is to get out of our own story and to start connecting with our audiences.

See [video](#) for the full introduction by Jonah.
Myth Gaps Review

Jonah led the group through a discussion of the Myth Gaps (the document prepared for the workshop – click here for the full document). Small groups discussed any revisions and additions to make sure the group had a full picture of stories that no longer work for our audiences.

The Myth Gap exercise was designed to get us thinking through the minds of our audiences. Instead of beginning with our grand vision, we focused on what needs for explanation our audiences are feeling. This background work allows us to create stories that will be more culturally relevant beyond the choir.

We began this exercise by defining two heroes (the disoriented citizen and the frustrated CSO change agent). After reading and discussion of the stories that are no longer working for our audiences (myth gaps), groups were created (one for each myth) in which all participants had the chance to make elaborations on the myth gap document descriptions and make revisions/additions to those.

The questions that were asked for each myth were: ‘What parts of this story are not working any more?’ and ‘What are the seeds for new stories?’

Disoriented Citizen Myth Gaps:

The failing story of economic growth

What is not working?

- The citizen is confused because there are two contradictory stories on offer: On the one hand, the planet is going down due to the pressure from economic growth; on the other hand, the official hammerings on growth as the creator of jobs and wealth.
- There is a growing sense that the underlying myth of growth is a failing as a result of high unemployment rates and financial recession etc.
- At the same time, the citizen is bombarded with messages of consumerism that can contribute to growth. As a consumer, she can exercise her freedom. So she buys a car, but then she gets stuck in traffic, she feels trapped in an ‘golden cage of consumerism’.

Seeds for new stories:

- Progress of wellbeing should be in the forefront. It should not be about ‘saving’ or ‘spending’ but about ‘social investment’ that leads to a fairer redistribution. Invest not only money, but investment should create the basis needed for allowing social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, a renewed democracy and a new economy.

The failing story of the ‘invisible hand’:

What is not working?

- Misinterpretation of Smith has made ‘individualism’ a virtue, as power of religion falls.
- Neoliberal argument is that pursuing self-interest and selfishness leads us to the best results.
- Market gives spectrum of choice but this often puts pressure and constraints on choice of other options. The invisible hand leads to monopolies and externalizations. The new reality of ecological limits means that market freedoms reduce freedoms of others.
Where is the market not working for the citizen? Inequality, (Occupy movement: “we are the 1%”). Injustice in the use of ecological resources.

**Seeds for new stories:**

- Rejection of market: Return to old cooperative values. Our hero takes initiative to live with reduced comfort but begins to build a bottom up alternative communities (e.g. kibbutz style protest/innovation)
- Cooperation and collaboration just as natural as self-interest.

**The failing story of the nation state identity**

**What is not working?**

- Current national and global institutions are not capable to develop effective responses to current ecological, social and economic crises. But crises require global responses.
- Global governance is effectively in the hands of multinational companies and reinforcing the crises.
- Continuous noise about the national interest made by politicians is losing credibility among an increasing share of citizens.

**Seeds for new stories:**

- Notion of freedom (but not at the cost of others) and subsidiarity (solve the problems at the lowest level possible- individuals can participate in their most immediate context, local activism).
- A new definition of national identity that can exist without nationalism.
- Globalization and growth stories have been told from the perspective of consumerism and neo-liberalism. Now, in an open and interconnected society, it needs to be told from the human side, from a community-values perspective.
Frustrated CSO Change Agent Myth Gaps:

The failing story of incremental change

What is not working?

- Old myth logic was that victories, little by little would create change. Reality seems to show that that this is happening too slowly, it does not touch the root causes, but the symptoms.
- We are missing big moments and windows of opportunity, and, hence, loosing appeal and “touch” with people.
- Current CSO campaigns put focus on goals before the means- this is not systemic change. If you use the inner logic of the system you want to change, what you will achieve is perpetuation.
- We need to move from a position in which we hold a “system” that is fading and rather to put our energy in another one.

Seeds for new stories:

- There is need for clarity on what the new system looks like. We need to express clearly where we are heading.
- We need to change from “within” and work with our audiences to make them our hero, to find their adventure towards the change path.

The failing story of development

What is not working?

(Note: The persona of focus was the Northern CSO)

- Development and growth have been approached traditionally from a capitalistic mindset (development = industrialization). As the development sector continues to grow and in the current context of crisis, as a sector we need to revisit the myth of development and to connect with the original vision.

Seeds for new stories:

- Understanding development locally versus development imposed from the North to the South.
- Move from a technocratic approach of aid effectiveness to development effectiveness. There is more than aid/charity model, a broad spectrum of work to create and enhance development.
- Empowerment/ ownership/ participation: development as a vision that can be adapted/ used. Citizens and individuals taking choice. Take hands off the wheel to allow local understanding and expertise to flourish. Get the local expertise on board.
The failing story of efficiency / technology

What is not working?

- By focussing on technological and efficiency solutions, large part of civil society action is serving a system that is itself broken (rebound effects, growth ultimately create more of the same externalities and just postpone the breakdown).
- The idea that technology will save us: Mental frames are very embedded in the old paradigm. Efficiency as the only way of managing resources.

Seeds for new stories:

- Need to include new parameters in technology development i.e. creativity, change measurement indicators, socially interconnected technologies, open organisations. Technology at the service of people’s needs.

Jonah’s Story Strategy Map

For the rest of the workshop we were following Jonah’ story strategy map to develop our Great Transition story strategy. The steps were:

- **Broken world letter exercise** – write a letter from the point of view of our hero to help us understand her broken world.
- **Values exercise** – choose the higher-level values we want our GT brand to be based on.
- **Archetype exercise** – uncover the character of our GT brand, connecting to our chosen values and who we are at our best.
- **Brand gift exercise** – clarify/develop what is the gift that the mentor (our GT brand) gives to the hero to help her succeed.
- **Healed World Letter Exercise & Moral of the Story** – the hero writes a letter to the mentor to express her gratitude. Discover what is the moral of the story (from the letter)
- **Story seeds** – Start developing our stories.

**Broken World Letter-Writing Exercise**

Participants wrote a letter from an imagined (or real) specific brand hero to a loved one that paints a vivid picture of their “broken world.” These letters highlighted how our audiences see the difficulty in living out their values and achieving the future they desire. Participants chose a hero who is a CSO leader or a general public audience member. Several letters were presented to
create a shared sense of our Great Transition brand heroes.

The above letter is one of the 22 letters that were written – in this case stemming from a imaginary (or real) frustrated CSO change agent (letters are being collated in a different document).

There were very clear common themes in all letters: Letters written by the disoriented citizen were referring to the disenchantment with the economic system that was making them vulnerable, the stress they were exposed in an economic system focussed on ever increasing competition and the doubts about a consumer society that was actually not providing the wellbeing and quality of life it once promised and was destroying the livelihoods of people and our heroes. The frustrated CSO change agents wrote letters about an increasing realisation that their organisations’ efforts of trying to improve the environment or social issues were ultimately not paying off. Many heroes in the letters were in a deep crisis and some even considering leaving their organisations.

Values Exercise

Keeping our Great Transition brand heroes squarely in mind, we chose values that we think we, as brand storytellers, could share with them and inspire them to live out. We broke into small group discussions and then presented the findings back to the bigger group. Two straw men value triads were chosen to continue on with (one focused on the citizen hero and one on the CSO change
The Values exercise was an elaboration exercise to approach and engage our audiences. As brand storytellers we need to inspire our audiences and heroes to live those values out.

During this session there was a discussion about the type of audiences that we were going to approach with our GT stories. We were referring to the segmentation between the choir of already convinced audiences, the persuadables and the deniers who are very difficult to reach. Some participants were agreeing that the stories had to target the persuadables by connecting with them on values.

Importantly it was pointed out that a new GT brand with a focus on the citizen would still need to identify its audiences. Most likely they will differ considerably from the traditional segmentation our organisations are used to.

For any adventure to start, we need the following steps to be followed by our hero:

- **Step 1: the Hearth**: every personal journey begins with the basic needs of the human being covered. We need to ask ourselves, what fundamental values can be reinforced in our audiences, so they are ready to start the journey?
- **Step 2: the Path**: when basic needs are met, the discovery of a new path starts. We need to find what lies in wait beyond our front door. Search for esteem, meaning and value
- **Step 3: the Adventure**: when we are fulfilled on our more fundamental levels, we begin to seek our highest expression—transcendent values.

We were given value cards. Jonah instructed the group to choose one value out of each card with the aim of choosing 3 values as a basis for the story strategy. We were told that it is important to narrow down the number of brand values to three as this would provide for a clearer story strategy. We had to work towards reaching consensus and choose those values that could speak both to the CSO change agent and the citizen.

The process of choosing the values behind the Great Transition story strategies happened in three stages. Initially we had four discussion groups. Each team received three value cards. Following each two of them merged into one, eventually leaving two teams.

We were looking for values that our audiences hold and we can share with them authentically. On the basic level — the Hearth — values can be thought of as basic needs we can meet for our audiences. On the higher levels — the Path and the Adventure — they become ideals that we can help our audiences reach for themselves.

In one of the groups there was immediate consensus on the value of optimism. Many agreed that it is the right value as it symbolizes hope for change (One member said: “In the middle of a hopeless atmosphere, there is light”). The path card seemed to include many relevant values such
as ‘connectivity’, ‘justice’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘fun’. There was less agreement on which value to choose from this card but ‘connectivity’ won over the other favourite ‘justice’. Some members of this group argued: “Justice has been a starting point for many civil society movements. But then it is a reactive strategy. Do we feel in an unjust situation?” The third card of adventure offered some relevant values such as empowerment, integrity (Be the change you want to see in the world), emancipation and curiosity.

Having heard the advice from Jonah that the teams should choose the values that are at a higher level, the result of the discussion within two separate groups were as follows:

- The first team chose TRUST – COURAGE – IMAGINATION. First, for this team, next to trust, curiosity and optimism also play their part. Second, courage was seen as a higher value above justice, connectivity, love and courage. Third, imagination was chosen as they thought creativity is core to the Great Transition.

- The second team chose OPTIMISM – CONNECTIVITY – INTEGRITY. This team said optimism was favoured, as a positive approach would fire the hero from the heart. Second, the team thought connectivity was essential for the hero to walk on the paradigm shift path. The individual needs to connect with others, understand the root causes and systemic issues. Then after other values such as justice can be set free. Third, engagement was chosen.

Each one of the straw man value triads was used as point of reference for building the GT brand towards our two main audiences.

**Archetype Exercise**

As a next step we were supposed to uncover our Great Transition brand mentor’s archetype, connecting our chosen values with the character of our authentic core.

We explored the 15 Archetypes (from the archetype cards Jonah gave us) to help us determine what type of storytellers we plan to be when promoting the GT brand. Participants were invited to identify the archetype of their own CSO as well as the overall archetype of the shared brand. Two straw men archetypes were chosen to move forward with. The core question that we had to address was: “What kind of a person do you think our hero wants meet?”

Two main mentor archetypes that initially chosen were:

**Pioneer** – curious, brave and optimistic about the future. By choosing the pioneer as the mentor it could be an acknowledgement that the Great Transition is an experimental uncertain process that requires pioneers. The values the group that chose this archetype held were: TRUST – COURAGE – IMAGINATION. Later the group that initially chose the pioneer added a second archetype. It chose to go for a combination of **pioneer** and **muse**. The **muse** is humble, imaginative, creative and optimistic.
**Captain** – idealistic, confident, tireless and brave. This archetype was chosen as a visionary leader inspiring trust to its audiences about the Great Transition. The values the group that chose this archetype held were: OPTIMISM – CONNECTIVITY – INTEGRITY.

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**Brand Gift**

With a sense of our values and archetype in place, we considered what makes our offering breakthrough and credible in the minds of audiences? What differentiates us? What makes the GT something enticing and memorable? Two straw man brand gifts were generated and applied to our emerging story strategy maps.

In order to bring us closer to the expression of our brand gift, we started the session with sharing our personal ideas about what the Great Transition means for each of us and what are the most important aspects of it.

Unsurprisingly in this group, most of the aspects and general ideas that were shared about the GT were common: as there was the paradigm shift towards a new economic model, the cultural shift away from consumerism and the idea that the vision of the GT was flexible, but had some basic parameters.
However, the two groups representing each one of the straw men emphasized different aspects of the GT. These different emphases helped them to start shaping their brand gifts:

**Captain group:** The group that had initially chosen the captain as their mentor’s archetype was focussing on the need for some kind of clear vision towards the GT. Civil society change agents as well as ordinary citizens are frustrated and have no hope with the current way of doing things. It requires something that people can believe in and that inspires people to work towards. So the captain group was clearly emphasising the vision aspect of the GT. The clearest expression of a brand gift that came out of this group was the idea of a **Puzzle:** The puzzle would represent the idea that many elements of the Great Transition are already there – ideas and the seeds of the new economy being shaped. But the puzzle is still very incomplete and many the loose elements need to be connected and put together to create the new society/economy. The brand gift would be to help people put the puzzle together under a common vision.

**Pioneer/Muse group:** The group that was working with a mixed archetype of pioneer and muse was emphasising the co-creation (process) aspect of the Great Transition: “Releasing the power in each person to create positive change in the world.” The brand gift that emerged from this group was the **Butterfly:** “Engage people by asking them the right questions. Be like a butterfly delicate and reflective of life, tap into the potential of people, humble but inspiring, giving the message: If you want, you can change.”

Having developed two straw men of GT brand values, archetypes and brand gifts, for the rest of the workshop the group split up into two to develop one story strategy each: One with a target audience of **disoriented citizen** (the pioneer/muse – butterfly group) and the other targeting the **frustrated CSO change agent** (the pioneer – puzzle group).

**Healed World Letter Exercise & Moral of the Story**

We returned to the brand heroes and wrote a second letter, this time from the perspective of a healed world. The hero has moved passed old blocks and the GT is underway. We described the encounter with the mentor and what the mentor said that got our hero moving. And we described what our hero’s world now looks like.

The below shows one of the 22 letters written by the hero to the same loved one she wrote to when her world was broken. The other letters are collated in a different document.

All letters were nicely showing common patterns for how the CSO change agent hero on the one side was thriving in a world where the vision of the GT was showing her a much more effective way to deal with the world’s social and ecological crises and on the other side the citizen hero was feeling the ease on her shoulder after having engaged in the participative process of the GT and having co-created a new economic model that works so much better for the people and the planet.
After having shared some of the letters, we were tasked by Jonah to draw two compelling **Morals of the Story** out of the hero’s journey expressed in the letter exercise. The moral of the story is a key element in our GT story strategy and drawing on the hero’s journey it shall express a core lesson about how the world works. It should speak in simple terms and connect with people on a human scale, in words they can feel and touch.

The Pioneer/Muse group was exploring these morals of the story:

- You are not alone: Don’t lose a chance to inspire others.
- Be the change you want to see in the world – then scale it up and connect it.
• You can create the freedom you desire.
• People are more important than profits if we reconnect to what really matters.

The Captain group’s ideas for morals of the story were:
• Create a space for action – the ideas already exist.
• If we want to have a chance of tackling our global crises, we need to tackle the cultural and economic root causes.

Due to our time constraints we didn’t agree on two clearly expressed morals of the story, but we thought that we had already a sense of where we were heading...

**Two Initial Story Strategies**

To summarise, we had the following story strategies:

**Story strategy 1: It is the system, stupid! We can change and reconnect our CSOs and we can together change the system!**

*Values:* Optimism, connectivity and integrity

*Mentor archetype:* Captain – idealistic, vision oriented, confident, but not losing sight of the true goal: empowering others to become true change agents for the Great Transition.

*Brand gift:* The GT vision and the support in experimenting with new CSO strategies for cultural and economic transformation. Symbolised by a piece of a world puzzle: we all hold a piece of it, but we do not know the power of it until it is completed (the GT provides the vision to ‘glue up’ this puzzle).

*Moral of the story:* We as CSOs can become effective change agents by starting to put the Great Transition puzzle together. First change our own organisations and then change the system! (as it was emerging…)

**Story strategy 2: You can connect and inspire others to create the world you desire**

*Values:* Trust, courage and imagination

*Mentor Archetype:* Pioneer/Muse – curious, brave, imaginative, creative and optimistic about the future.

*Brand gift:* Asking the right questions that will spark inspiration for change. Identify the right questions to develop shared values. Symbol: a butterfly: not imposing, subtle, touches. Asks and leaves to continue inspiring.

*Moral of the story:* If you are the change you want to see in the world and ask the right questions, you can inspire others to co-create the Great Transition (as it was emerging…).

**Story Seeds**

With two possible story strategies before us we had little time left at our workshop and Jonah
suggested to give it a go and start to develop possible plots for our two different stories, one with a citizen hero and one with a CSO hero. Here is what started to emerge and still needs to be continued with more time:

**Story based on story strategy 1: It is the system, stupid! We can change and reconnect our CSOs and we can together change the system!**

- Target audience and hero: The frustrated CSO change agent.
- A short movie that intends to inspire the frustrated CSO change agent to become part of the movement of CSO people working on changing their CSOs and CSO strategies to collaborate on a common framework (Great Transition) for deep system change.
- The emerging plot starts with a view of the earth zooming into small positive seeds (lights) of the Great Transition and CSOs working towards it. Then we zoom into another scene where our hero is seeing a lot of fragmentation among CSOs and their work. We briefly show a few
clear examples of where CSO work is not working. Then we show the bad guy – the bad guy is the system itself and the pockets of light are only addressing the symptoms, being eradicated by the system. But the system obliges us to do this. Then the gift is coming: The platform to learn about the Great Transition and to have a community of practice for change agents to learn new ways for CSOs to change the system – the new system is shown in form of an incomplete puzzle. Then the small little lights become one big light showing how the puzzle is shaping and becoming complete. Civil society has become a driving force for the GT...

**Story based on story strategy 2: You can connect and inspire others to create the world you desire:**

- Target audience and hero: The disoriented citizen.
- A short movie intended to inspire the disoriented citizen to become part of the movement of people co-creating the Great Transition.
- Show the problems of our current broken world and using shadows as visual tool. A butterfly takes us through the movie. We see the glimpses of the future in bright colours and children playing, people collaborating. The butterfly is there. But then we see that this is just a dream a woman (our hero) is dreaming and she wakes up and is back in her grey broken world. Then the gift in the shape of the butterfly comes back to our hero in her real world. As a result of the butterfly touching her (possibly also asking her a few key questions?) we see her with a determined face expression to become active in co-creating the world she just dreamt of...
- The music changes according to the change of scene, old and new world (Alice in Wonderland being one of the pieces).

**Conclusion:**

- We learned a lot.
- The methodology of story telling was fantastic.
- We had a lot of fun.
- It was a great group.
- We had a great facilitator
- We have to continue our promising story strategies and stories!
Participants:
Natalia Alonso, Oxfam International EU Advocacy Office
Amy Bartlett, Open Forum for CSO Development Effectiveness
Martin Beyerle, Minds & Makers
Rafael Cobo, Nomada Lab
Olivier Consolo, Concord - European NGO confederation for Relief and Development
Ruth Kelly, Oxfam GB
Stephan Kerl, Südwind Agentur
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