

Speaking to the Heart: Storytelling for Social Change



“I believe that all organizing is science fiction - that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced.”

— **adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good***

Listening, relating, & shaping

Storytelling is about connection—it builds our collective understanding and trust. By approaching cause communications as a dialogue in which we listen as well as share, we can start to shift the othering that perpetuates inequity and cultivate empathy and solidarity. Thus, storytelling becomes a transformative act that invites everyone to participate in collective action.

Our stories are about people: the individuals and communities most affected by water issues. When we co-create these stories with frontline communities, we honor the agency of those impacted and ensure that the storytelling is rooted in lived experiences and shared values. Rather than speaking for communities, we are speaking with them.

The mainstream media often leaves out marginalized voices— those who live the realities of water shutoffs, contaminated drinking water, and unaffordable water rates. Stories can counter entrenched narratives about scarcity, deservingness, and dominion over nature that underpin current water challenges. Our work and challenge as a movement is to share new stories of collective care and community-driven solutions— moving beyond limiting narratives and toward those that center equity and justice.

A good story brings us into the worlds of those directly affected, reminding us that change grows from the ground up. While sometimes reality may evoke grief, anger and fear, ultimately, a feeling of constructive hope (affirming that solutions are possible and within reach) and empathy is what motivates action.

What makes a good story?

A good story is a vessel for values, emotions, and new possibilities. Impactful storytelling brings an issue into focus by immersing the audience into a new world where they can feel how current challenges connect to their home, heart, and health. Good stories include some basic elements:

- **Conflict:** What is the struggle/challenge? For us, this could be the battle for equitable water access, the effects of failing infrastructure, or the struggle for water affordability.
- **Characters:** Who is affected, and who is fighting for change? From community activists to families facing water shutoffs, our characters are real and relatable. We don't just focus on the individual characters; we show the role of systems and underscore our power to shift them to serve everyone equitably.
- **Imagery:** How can you capture the senses through pictures or words? Think of a child drinking from a tap for the first time in days or a dry riverbed where there once was life. Imagery, whether visual or auditory, evokes emotion that data alone cannot convey.
- **Foreshadowing:** What futures are we calling into being? Our stories should show both the dire consequences of inaction and the hopeful possibilities of collective action.
- **Messenger:** A compelling story needs a strong message and a relatable messenger. Research shows that stories are more impactful when they feel relational and authentic rather than purely persuasive. For some, it might be more compelling to hear from a faith leader versus a scientist or elected official.

More Resources



Narrative Initiative's
Waves Model



Center for
Story-Based Strategy



Brett Davidson on
valuing real listening