

WORKSHEET  
**TELLING YOUR PUBLIC STORY**  
**Self, Us, Now**  
**By Marshall Ganz**

Stories not only teach us how to act – they inspire us *to* act. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we *feel* – our hopes, our cares, our obligations – not simply what we *know* that can inspire us with the courage to act.

A plot is structured with a beginning, movement toward a desired goal, an unexpected event, a crisis that engages our curiosity, choices made in response to the crisis, and an outcome. Our ability to empathetically identify with a protagonist allows us to enter into the story, feel what s/he feels, see things through his or her eyes. And the moral, revealed through the resolution, brings understanding. From stories we learn how to manage ourselves, how to face difficult choices, unfamiliar situations, and uncertain outcomes because each of us is the protagonist in our own life story, facing everyday challenges, authoring our own choices, and learning from the outcomes.

By telling our personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes we can inspire others and share our own wisdom. Because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.

Stories are specific – they evoke a very particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, texture, taste. The more you can communicate this specificity, the more power your story will have to engage others. This may seem like a paradox, but like a poem or a painting or a piece of music, it is the specificity of the experience that can give us access to the universal sentiment or insight they contain.

You may think that your story doesn't matter, that people aren't interested, that you shouldn't be talking about yourself. But when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead. The thing about it is that if you don't author your public story, others will, and they may not tell it in the way that you like - as many recent examples show.

A good story public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the “plot” of your life – the **challenges** you faced, **choices** you made, and **outcomes you experienced**.

**Challenge:** Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it *your* challenge?

**Choice:** Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage – or not? Where did you get the hope – or not? How did it feel?

**Outcome:** How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel?

The story you tell of why you sought to lead allows others insight into your values, why you have chosen to act on them in this way, what they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you.

A public story includes three elements:

- **A story of self:** why you were called to what you have been called to.
- **A story of us:** what your constituency, community, organization has been called to its shared purposes, goals, vision.
- **A story of now:** the challenge this community now faces, the choices it must make, and the hope to which “we” can aspire.

In this worksheet, we focus on the “story of self”, but we also offer some suggestions on getting to a story of us and a story of now. Remember the art of story telling is in the telling, not in the writing. In other words, story telling is interactive, a form of social transaction, and can therefore only be learned by telling, and listening, and telling, and listening.

### Story of Self

Take the time to reflect on your own public story by beginning with your story of self. Grab a notebook, a recorder, or a friend who will listen, and describe the milestones and experiences that have brought you to this moment. Go back as far as you can remember.

You might start with your parents. What made them the people they became? How did their choices influence your own? Do you remember certain “family stories”, perhaps told so often you may have gotten tired of hearing them. Why did they tell these stories and not others? What was the moral of these stories? What did they teach? How did they make you feel?

In your own life, focus on challenges you had to face, the choices you made about how to deal with them, and the satisfactions – or frustrations - you experienced. What did you learn from the outcomes and how you feel about them today? What did they teach you about yourself, about your family, about your peers, about your community, about your nation, about the world around you, about people - about what really matters to you? What about these stories was so intriguing? Which elements offered real perspective into your own life?

If you’re having trouble, here are some questions to get you started. These questions are NOT meant to be answered individually. They are intended to help to inspire you and get your memory gears rolling so that you can reflect on your public story and tell it with brevity and intentionality. Don’t expect to include the answers to all these questions each time you tell your story. They are the building blocks of many potential stories, and the object right now is to lay them out in a row and see what inspires you.

What memories do you have as a child that link to the people, places, events that you value? What are your favorite memories? What images, sounds or smells in particular come up for you when you recall these memories?

List every job or project that you have ever been involved with connected with these values, or not. Be expansive; include things like camping in the wild, serving in a youth group, going to a political rally, organizing a cultural club, experiencing a moment of transcendence. List classes you have taken, projects you have led, and work that you have done that connects with your values. Name the last five books or articles that you have read (by choice) or movies or plays that you have seen. What do you see as a connection or theme that you can see in all of the selections? What did you enjoy about these articles? What does your reading say about you?

Some of the moments you recall may be painful as well as hopeful. You may have felt excluded, put down or powerless, as well as courageous, recognized, and inspired. Be sure to attend to the moments of “challenge” as well as to the moments of “hope” – and to learn to be able to articulate these moments in ways that can enable others to understand who you are. It is the combination of “criticality” and “hopefulness” that creates the energy for change.

What was the last time you spent a day doing what you love doing? What in particular made you want to use that day in that way? What was memorable about the day? Is there a specific sight, sound or smell that you think of when you recall this day?

What factors were behind your decision to pursue a career in public work? Was there pressure to make different choices? How did you deal with conflicting influences?

Who in your life was the person who introduced you to your “calling” or who encouraged you to become active? Why do you think that they did this? What did your parents model? What was the role, if any, of a community of faith? Whom did you admire?

Whom do you credit the most with your involvement now in work for your cause? What about their involvement in your life made a difference? Why do you think it was important to them to do so?

### **Story of Us**

We are all part of multiple “us’s” – families, faiths, cultures, communities, organizations, and nations in which we participate with others. What community, organization, movement, culture, nation, or other constituency do you consider yourself to be part of, connected with? With whom do you share a common past? With whom do you share a common future? Do you participate in this community as a result of “fate”, “choice” or both? How like or unlike the experience of others do you believe your own experience to be? One way we establish an “us” – a shared identity – is through telling of shared stories, stories through which we can articulate the values we share, as well as the particularities that make us an “us.”

Your challenge will be to define an “us” upon whom you will call to join you in action motivated by shared values, values you bring alive through story telling. However you define the “us” whom you hope to move, it must consist of real people with whom you can communicate, move or not move, engage or not engage, get to act or not.

Here at Harvard there are many potential “us’s” among your classmates, as there are in any community. They may come to think of themselves as an “us” based on enrolling in

this class, enrolling in the same year, enrolling in the same program, sharing similar aspirations, sharing similar backgrounds (work experience, religion, generation, ethnicity, culture, nationality, family status, etc.), sharing similar experiences coming to school here, sharing similar values commitments, similar career aspirations, etc. Your challenge will be to think through the “us” whom you hope to move to join you in acting together on behalf of a shared calling.

Some of the “us’s” you could invite your classmates to join are larger “us’s” in which you may already participate. You may be active in the environmental movement, for example, and may find others among your classmates who are as well. You may be active in a faith community, a human rights organization, a political campaign, a support organization, an immigrant association, a labor union, and alumni group, etc. Some “us’s” have been around for literally thousands of years, such as the stories that define most faith traditions – some only for a few days. Most “us’s” that have been around for a while have stories about how their founding, the challenges faced by the founders, how they overcame them, who joined with them, and what this teaches us about the values of the organization. They also usually have tales of critical crises that were faced, like the American Civil War, for example, about which Abraham Lincoln told such a powerful story in his Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address.

So you may want to invite your classmates to join you in a larger “us” already working together or you may want to engage them in articulating a new “us” based on experiences that you are sharing now. In fact, you probably already have numerous stories of us that communicate what it means to be a “midcareer”, for example, based on events that took place during the summer program. Remember, like all stories, a story of us is built from a challenge, the choice made in response to that challenge, and the moral taught by the outcome.

How would you define the “us” whom you hope to call upon to join you in your public narrative? Please describe it in a single sentence if you can.

### **Story of Now**

Now we know why you’ve been called to a particular mission, we know something of who it is you want to call upon to join you in that mission, so what action does that mission require of you right here, right now, in this place?

A ‘story of now’ is urgent, it requires dropping other things and paying attention, it is rooted in the values you celebrated in your story of self and us, and a contradiction to those values that requires action.

- Do you share the value that those who sacrifice for their country should be honored for doing so? Does the quality of care returning veterans receive meet this standard? If not, what are you going to do about it?
- Do you share the value that the current generation should pass on a livable world to the next generation? Do the measures being taken to deal with climate change meet this standard? If not, what are you going to do about it?
- Do you share the value that powerful institutions, especially those that benefit from public support, have moral responsibilities to the public in how they use their power? Which one’s? How? What are you going to do about it?

- Do you share the value that all racial, religious, and cultural groups should be treated equally under the law? Can

Leaders who only describe problem, but fail to identify action those whom they bring together can take to address the problem, aren't very good leaders. A list of "100 things you can do to make the world better" is a "cop-out." If you are called to address a real challenge, a challenge so urgent have motivated us to face it as well, then you also have a responsibility to invite us to join you in action that has some chance of success. A 'story of now" is not simply a call to make a choice, to act – it is a call to "hopeful" action.

If you ask me to "change a light bulb" for example, to deal with climate change, do you really think it will happen? Especially if it's among 100 other things I might – or might not – do? But if you ask me to join you in persuading the Kennedy School to change all of its light bulbs by signing a student petition, joining you in a delegation to the dean, and, adding my name to a public list of KSG students who have committed to changing the light bulbs where they live, what do you think the odds are of success? An even if the possibility of success seems remote, why is credible action still required? Wouldn't forming a group committed to identifying action steps that can be taken by x date also be a form of action?

What urgent "challenge" might you call upon us to face? What specific "action" might you call upon us to take? Please respond with single sentences if you can.
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### Linking

In the end you will be asked to link your story of self, story of us, and story of now into a single public narrative. As you will see, however, this is an iterative – and non-linear – process. Each time you tell your story you will adapt it – to make yourself clearer, to adjust to a different audience, to locate yourself in a different context. As you develop a story of us, you may find you want to alter your story of self, especially as you begin to see the relationship between the two more clearly. Similarly, as you develop a story of now, you may find it affects what went before. And, as you go back to reconsider what went before, you may find it alters your story of now. You will not leave this class with a final "script" of your public narrative but, if we are successful, you will have learned a process by which you can generate that narrative over and over and over again when, where, and how you need to.