

BNPower:

BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

A set of multimedia tools that explore why some ideas take root while others disappear.

Narrative Power: The Epic Adventure **Animation Transcript**

00:18 NARRATOR: *Stories don't just draw their power from words. Who we are and what we believe are the results of a complex mix of powerful influences. We often hear about the impact of family or culture on what we do or think but there are many powerful structures like school, media, faith, health systems, that interact and shape us and the world around us.*

*These stories become the dominant narratives that most of us use to make sense of the world ...
...who we are...
...what matters most
...and how we organize our society.*

FANNIE: [gasps]

NARRATOR: *We're told that in order to move people, we have to tell compelling stories... We need to make them dramatic... Appealing... Make them sizzle! ...And if we don't get the results we wanted, we believe our story failed.*

FANNIE: UGH!

FANNIE: What the?

SAGE: Hiya!

FANNIE: Am I still dreaming?

SAGE: I don't know. It's not a bad thing to dream.

FANNIE: Wait, how can you talk? You're a fox!

SAGE: *Just go with this kid. If we want to generate systems change for the greater good, we need to understand the importance of narrative power.*

The power to define what's true, to determine the story of the past and institutionalize ideas so they replicate, this is narrative power.

FANNIE *Huh! How did you do this?*

SAGE: *Narrative power is a forest that's grown strong over centuries.*

NARRATOR: *That's what it looks like when interlocking systems of oppression grow larger and more powerful over time. It's not about any one narrative. It's the interconnected web of stories and ideas on which we depend, to let us know what's true... what's fact... what's safe...*

NARRATOR: *Let's look at Covid-19.*

The magnitude of Covid has been undeniable. Many thought it would be a wake-up call that would unite the country and motivate policymakers to fix our broken and inequitable health system.

FANNIE: *That certainly didn't happen...Our country grew more divided.*

SAGE: *You're right! We saw people refusing to comply with science-backed safety precautions, like wearing masks, because they said it interfered with their freedom. Yet, the very people we depend on to care for us, keep us fed—what we call our essential workers—were even more exploited.*

FANNIE: *Yeah. You didn't hear much about their freedom.*

NARRATOR: *Dominant narratives about who deserves care, about health care being a business, and that business is what matters most, were more powerful than the data right in front of us...*

SAGE: *I want to show you something.*

FANNIE: *Oh! Seeds!*

SAGE: *Each of those seeds is a story. This work is about so much more than messaging. It's about shifting the way structures reproduce meaning on a mass scale.*

NARRATOR: *Dominant narratives become dominant because they are reinforced by other forms of power. They have been rooted, protected and cultivated over hundreds of years.*

FANNIE: *...and the seeds that you're planting are new narratives!*

SAGE: *Hey, your turn, kid!*

SAGE: *Whoa whoa whoa whoa! Easy does it, friend!*

NARRATOR: *If we randomly throw our stories around without a plan for how they'll grow, at best we'll end up with a few great narratives from time to time. But nothing close to cultivating narrative power.*

5:35 NARRATOR: *We're surrounded by so many structures and systems that dominate our inner and outer worlds.*

SAGE: *You know this place. School reinforces dominant narratives...*

FANNIE :...about what's fact and what's worth knowing... or not...

NARRATOR: Faith Institutions often reinforce dominant narratives about our relationship to the earth other species and to each other as human beings.

SAGE :Art and music...

FANNIE: Mass media...

SAGE: shape how we think and feel about ourselves and the world around us.

NARRATOR: Our friends and family, even us! We are all parts of this forest of powerful, interlocking, and too often unhealthy systems.

SAGE: Not all of these narratives are bad.

FANNIE: But not enough of them support our values. And many are actually harmful. Like how there are so many narratives that push the idea that our health is primarily a matter of individual choice—Instead of about our access to healthy food, or safe places to play, or jobs...

SAGE: Yeah, exactly. There's a lot of victim blaming going on and not as much focus on the structures and systems that create these inequities in the first place. These harmful narratives don't evolve solely at the individual level. The very institutions that we depend on to help us make sense of the world, have helped root and maintain these harmful stories. That's why we need to do more than plant new narratives. We have to clear out these negative ones too.

CARETAKER #1: Hey! I'm Gina. We're here to help.

CARETAKER #2: Cameron here. How are ya?

FANNIE: Hi... Are you with the fox?

CAMERON: Never met... How you doin'? We're organizers. We've been working this forest for years. It's a tricky beast if you don't have experience with it.

GINA: We're old hands at this and thought we'd save you extra work.

FANNIE: Huh, I feel good about my progress, but I appreciate your show of support.

NARRATOR: Growing a forest, narrative power for our ideas and values, requires space, care and special attention to what we hope to grow.

FANNIE: Uh Oh... Oh no! No! No! No! Wake up! Wake up! I confused the roots of our new tree with a root from the old forest! I got so excited pruning my first tree that I lost track! I completely mixed up my forests! Uuuugh! I, I helped the old forest grow!

SAGE : Huh. Yep... Wrong forest. This happens to all of us, kid, these ideas lie deep inside of us. The old forest is familiar. It's what we know. It's kinda like a default in our operating system. No one person's to blame.

CAMERON: *What a mess.*

SAGE: *That's why we need other people.*

FANNIE: *And a plan. We need a plan.*

NARRATOR: *It's not that our narratives aren't powerful. It's that they don't have narrative power. If narratives are the seeds, narrative power is the right combination of seeds, soil, water, sun and support.*

FANNIE: *Gotta say, this work of building narrative power is a bit harder than I thought.*

SAGE: *The good news is we don't need to build new narrative power from the ground up. There's already plenty of solid foundation we can work with.*

SAGE: *Hey, you want a coffee? I want a coffee? Let's get coffee.*

FANNIE: *Yes!*

NARRATOR: *We've seen organizers build that kind of power, forging formidable movements for effective institutional and cultural change. These changemakers confronted inequitable structures and the harmful narratives they produced. They also advanced other, more affirming narratives that elevated the dignity and power of communities and changed how many of us understood the world around us.*

10:17 SERVER: *Oh hey! How you doing? Welcome! Yea. Take a seat. Can I offer you something to drink?*

SAGE: *Regular cup of coffee please.*

FANNIE: *Chai latte.*

GINA: *That sounds good. I'll have a chai latte with coconut milk too, please.*

CAMERON: *Regular coffee*

SERVER: *Okay. I'll get those started for you.*

SAGE: *Thank you.*

FANNIE: *Cool! Check this out, folks like my rally photos.*

SAGE: *Oh! That's my jam! The 1960's! It was crazy.*

NARRATOR: *Let's explore a time when organizers built narrative power for lasting change in this country. Rebellion was in the air as a new generation of artists, activists, educators, health practitioners—everyday people—fought to transform this country into a place where we all could thrive.*

SAGE: *Millions came together to confront the old ways of being and doing things. It was awesome! We were lifting up our stories and our ideas of what is just and good, some ancient and some new, that had not been a part of the mainstream public conversation. We challenged dominant narratives about*

women, Black people, Indigenous peoples, food, worship, sexuality, disability. Oh-huh-huh! you name it, kid, and we were shaking it up! What kids learned and read in schools changed.

FANNIE: *Modern ways of dressing evolved... Groovy!*

GINA: *Artists explored new ideas, taking our notion of art beyond the museum into the world outside.*

CAMERON: *Our approach to community health changed.*

NARRATOR: *And innovations in TV programming amplified the scope and reach of media.*

GINA: *So these diverse groups, they challenged the existing power structures.*

SAGE: *To build narrative power and culture change that affirmed our values.*

NARRATOR: *We need to clear some forest to reduce the power of narratives that harm us and transform our culture and structures so that they cultivate and replicate narratives that help us thrive.*

SAGE: *Beautiful, isn't it?*

CAMERON: *It wasn't always this way. People smoked in cafés all the time.*

GINA: *Um, coffee and a cigarette go well together?*

CAMERON: *That was me.*

SAGE: *Smoking was everywhere. In corporate boardrooms and bars, on airplanes, in classrooms, even hospitals.*

SAGE: *Ahh, I remember it all. I used to smoke.*

GINA: *No way!*

SAGE: *We thought all the cool kids smoked. Big Tobacco partnered with candy makers, sometimes subsidiaries of their own companies, to make candy cigarettes for kids. Schools had students make ashtrays as crafts projects for Mother's Day.*

NARRATOR: *In 1964, almost half of American adults smoked cigarettes. Big Tobacco was one of the most powerful institutions in the country. This industry gained a lot of its strength by controlling the image of smoking in film and other media, to make cigarettes an integral part of everyday life. Tobacco control advocates were focused and determined. They created a multi-faceted initiative to transform the public's perception of smoking—and the tobacco industry.*

SAGE: *They were terrific. They organized to improve school curricula. Banned TV ads promoting cigarette smoking. Worked with Hollywood to disrupt the many ways TV and movies glamorized smoking. Filmmakers began producing more stories about the actual dangers of smoking. Public health advocates helped us understand that smoking wasn't just a personal choice, or a bad habit. It affected all of us.*

It made it hard to at least not try to quit. We get to breathe easy now, thanks to the public health advocates who confronted the tobacco industry and got clean indoor air policies passed nationwide.

FANNIE: *That's narrative power.*

NARRATOR: *Narrative power is the ability to root and cultivate story at scale, even in the face of opposition.*

FANNIE: *So, I'm re-programming my thinking to better understand and leverage power in a new, more strategic way.*

GINA: *How do we help each other? How do we reproduce and reinforce stories that support our shared values at scale?*

15:03 CAMERON: *Oh! Your seeds, Fannie. We'll build more narrative power with your story seeds.*

FANNIE: *But, this time we'll make sure we are tending the right forest. The one where we cultivate our values and ideas over time.*

SERVER: *Here you go.*

FANNIE: *I still can't believe I tended to the wrong forest!*

GINA: *Ugh, Fannie, I've tended to dominant narratives, even as an activist, without even realizing it! Like when we talk about immigrants being good for the economy and not talk about our humanity and right to live where we choose. Or working families. It started as a way to make a distinction between families with traditional wage earners versus those receiving public benefits. We ended up reinforcing negative stereotypes without meaning to.*

CAMERON: *I can see why we confused our narratives. Dominant narratives are so familiar. Uh, hence they are dominant, dominating, they dominate our thoughts.*

GINA: *We get the idea. Bottom line, we have to learn to see narrative and all forms of power around us.*

FANNIE: *You're right, Gina. We have to see the different kinds of power at play around us. And we have to be strategic about how we build power for the change we want to see.*

SAGE: *And remember, you need a strategy for structural change if you want to make narrative change. The two go together.*

FANNIE: *Just like seeds and soil? Narrative Power, Culture Change here we come!*

NARRATOR: *We have passion and ideas. We also need to know how we make our ideas come to life. That plan for how—that's strategy. Narrative power requires structural power to shape how institutions produce and replicate knowledge, values, and belief.*

FANNIE: *All right peeps, Off we go*

GINA: *Where are we going?*

FANNIE: *Well, we learned that when other movements built narrative power in the past, they figured out how to seed stories throughout society.*

GINA: *Yes! They changed culture, policy and everyday practice to not only change narrative—they also built narrative power to keep these ideas alive.*

CAMERON: *We're headed back to the forest, right?*

SAGE: *You got me. I'm just a fox.*

FANNIE: *Uh-huh. Yep, it's back to the forest. First we plan and then we plant.*

SAGE: *This must be what folks mean by "The end of the road."*

FANNIE: *Ugh. C'mon man!*

SAGE: *Kid, take a breath. You've been organizing enough to know about the current conditions. You all have. Now, what do you want to see on the other side?*

FANNIE: *We want to feel safe, connected, and hopeful about the future. We want a world where everyone can thrive.*

CAMERON: *And we want people to treat the planet better, to care about it. It's our home with a capital H.*

GINA: *We want people to be treated fairly, to live in dignity, to have justice. Justice that recognizes and seeks to repair the harm that's been done to many of our communities for, for, well, centuries!*

FANNIE: *Right! So, what we need is a strategy to take us from where we are to where we want to be, from the current state of things to what we want to cultivate.*

NARRATOR: *Building narrative power is inextricably tied to building structural power because structures like schools, health systems, and faith institutions are a critical part of how narratives are rooted and reproduced.*

FANNIE: *You see how I'm connecting these dots?*

CAMERON: *Sure do. Smart move.*

SAGE: *This is looking good. You've got some great ideas for a strategy.*

FANNIE: *Yeah. We have a plan to get more of the structures in our community to reinforce that we are all interconnected. Every person and everything.*

CAMERON: *The entire planet!*

GINA: *We just need to figure out how we tell and root more truthful stories about the past. It's so hard to talk about racism and what should be done when so many people don't know how we got here-*

CAMERON: *Or immigration. Some people act like these borders were always here and not the result of war and violence.*

20:09 NARRATOR: *This big mix of systems, practice, history, conditions, belief and most certainly power, fundamentally shape who we are as individuals, as community, even as a world. Narrative Power is deeply connected to every other form of power. As changemakers for justice, we need to understand that navigating this mix is critical to landing and rooting our message. Building narrative power is vital to achieving the mix we envision, and it is just one of the tools in our toolbox for transformative change.*

SAGE: *Shall we?*

FANNIE: *Here we are in the right place.*

FANNIE: *Wow! Look at this! It's a museum and a whole lot more.*

SAGE: *When the Equal Justice Initiative set out to disrupt the dominant narrative around racial violence, they knew they had to get people to confront the country's difficult past. You may not think of a museum as a narrative strategy, but it is. More than half a million people have visited the memorial and museum in Alabama. As a result, there are more people who have a shared understanding of the horrors of slavery, lynching and mass incarceration, as well as the ongoing injustices of racism in the US legal system.*

CAMERON: *Wow, movies, books, school curricula, local memorials, works of art, music. This is pretty comprehensive. It took decades of dreaming and strategic work to build this kind of narrative power. What an amazing legacy for generations to come.*

GINA: *Look at this one. The National Domestic Workers Alliance. They've helped get movies produced. Took over the Oscars! Come on now! All to build more understanding and public support for addressing the unfair treatment of domestic workers. Now that's impressive.*

FANNIE: *These are great examples of how we can connect the dots, changing structures and culture to disrupt the dominant narrative with new narratives.*

SAGE: *Working with newsmakers, the film industry, cultural organizations.*

CAMERON: *To evoke a broader conversation.*

FANNIE: *Which builds public support for structural and cultural change!*

SAGE: *And roots our ideas so that they are passed on even after we're gone. Don't you see how much power you hold? Advocates such as yourselves are working hard to engage us more deeply through interconnection. You're uplifting these beliefs in faith communities, through film, literature, music. In workplaces, schools, with your families, in corporations. The power is right here, all around you, and in your hands.*

FANNIE: *You wanna help?*

SAGE: *Me? I'm just a fox.*

NARRATOR: *Working together. Transforming our stories and systems. This is what it takes to build narrative power that helps us know the truth of who we are. To confront and heal our past with love and dignity, and build the power we need so that we create the world we long to see.*

~

GRANDDAUGHTER: *Tell me again about the fox.*

OLDER FANNIE: *Quite the colorful character. Sure did like to nap a lot.*

GRANDDAUGHTER: *Where do you think it is now?*

OLDER FANNIE: *Huh, I like to imagine that he is telling a story of his own.*

END