Clare Patey and George Marshall from Hard Art facilitated the 'Narratives Strand'

Where are we now?

What are the narratives that have got us here, which shape the way that people understand climate change. We interpret the world through stories. Stories give us ways of understanding events, locating ourselves within them, expressing identity and deciding what matters. They usually contain recognisable elements — struggle, conflict, characters, motivations, resolution.

Climate change presents a problem for conventional storytelling because it does not fit neatly into these structures. Who or what is the enemy? Climate change does not have an obvious antagonist in the way that many political stories do. Yet climate politics has often been framed through individual responsibility, personal behaviour and apparently universal responsibility.

There was a strong argument that we need to stop saying that climate change is "everyone's fault." The fossil-fuel industry helped establish a narrative in which responsibility was displaced onto individuals, obscuring the institutions, arrangements and power relations that have shaped emissions. There is also no single, homogeneous "humanity". There are humanities: different communities experience climate change differently, possess different resources and vulnerabilities, and have different capacities to act.

Taking our starting point from the initial conversation in plenary we explored the narratives for understanding where we are, and where we have come from in relation to climate change. We tried to map the existing narratives- not the emergent ones or the ones we should have, but the actual ways that different people and groups talk about it today.

What is not said?

Stories are constructed through language, populated by characters with motivations, and situated across time. But they also contain silences. Some possibilities are absent because they are never imagined; others because they are politically or culturally shut down and some are avoidant strategies. This raises the question of what kinds of futures people are currently unable to imagine.

There was a recurring observation that people often cannot imagine the future, so they imagine something from the past. This may help explain why political responses to disruption can become nostalgic, reactionary or focused on restoring a previous social order. The challenge is therefore partly a crisis of imagination.

What Emergent Narratives may come?

We went on to discuss emergent narratives that may be coming down the line… The **'No-Brainer' -** a simple story that makes positive action seem obvious, intuitive and difficult to argue against.

The '**Thrutopia'** - as an alternative to dystopia (apocalyptic collapse), utopia (a perfect future) – a realistic and collective pathway from the present through a difficult transition towards a better future. The emphasis is on the journey and the changes required rather than simply imagining the end state. This makes the concept particularly relevant to climate-change narratives, where the transition can involve conflict, sacrifice, innovation, adaptation, and institutional change.

'**Indigenous and community voices, knowledge and practice'** - how to 'weave' this wisdom and voices and practices of connection, continuity and collectivism into the conversation and how to reach audiences?

'**Narratives with resonance'** – that build on deep narrative structures, sacred values, moral imagination, that make us 'feel' and create new collaborations and alliances.

'**Grief narratives'** - that create space for loss, mourning, love and collective grieving rather than assuming that people must always be optimistic.

Moving from individual action to collective agency

A central problem with existing climate narratives is their tendency to focus on individual responsibility. Our workshop repeatedly returned to the importance of agency, but agency understood collectively. People need to feel that they can do something, but the relevant unit of action cannot always be the isolated individual. We need stories of people going through things together. This is closely connected to community and togetherness. The question becomes: How do we build a narrative in which people can see themselves as agents without pretending that individuals alone can solve structural problems?

There is also an important distinction between short-term and long-term motivation. Many interventions are justified through immediate cost-benefit calculations: what will I gain now? What will this policy cost? What is the economic return?But durable action may depend on motivations that extend beyond immediate rewards. This is where ideas such as cathedral thinking, sacred values, legacy and long-term responsibility become important.

The unresolved question

How do we create stories powerful enough to compete with the narratives already organising society, without creating another simplistic universal story? The new narrative would need to be:

Truthful about danger; capable of holding grief; grounded in existing values; attentive to structural power;

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- capable of holding grief;
- grounded in existing values;
- attentive to structural power;

- collective rather than individualistic;
- plural rather than culturally uniform;
- capable of generating agency;
- durable across long timescales;
- open to uncertainty;
- experimentally tested;
- and capable of producing conversations rather than simply delivering messages.

Perhaps the deepest challenge is that **climate change is not one story**.

It is a set of overlapping stories about identity, power, loss, responsibility, security, justice, faith, community, technology, economics and the future.

The task may therefore be less to discover *the* new climate narrative than to build the cultural conditions in which **new stories can emerge, connect and become durable forms of collective action.**