



AT THE INTERSECTION OF POWER AND HOPE

Narrative change in Minnesota

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Executive Summary

Twenty five years ago, Minnesota's progressive organizations faced a challenge they didn't know how to respond to. As neoliberal economic and political models took hold, corporations and their conservative allies used the "business climate" argument to defeat proposals to expand equity or invest in public sector solutions. The same problem was happening across the country, and everywhere social justice advocates found themselves in retreat.

I had recently moved to Minnesota and cofounded the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action. I and my colleagues were increasingly aware of the power of neoliberal ideology, which we had begun to refer to as a dominant framework, but it wasn't until I attended a training held by the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) that I acquired the intellectual tools to fight it.

Following the British social theorist Stephen Lukes, GPP named three arenas in which progressive organizations could contest for power: policy change, movement infrastructure, and ideology. By naming the third face of power, GPP drew the attention of community organizers to the value of fighting to control the public conversation. I started working with GPP to help my partners in Minnesota's social justice ecosystem figure out how to build power and win on the terrain of ideology.

Organizers and grassroots community activists found it easy to name the basic tenets of the corporate worldview. We had been watching it unfold with horror for well over a decade and knew its contours well. It was liberating to put them down on butcher paper and recognize there was nothing natural or inevitable about these claims of free market superiority: they had been created by people in rooms, just like us. Now we had to figure out how to rewrite them.

My allies in Minnesota had their own stories to tell, and I worked with them to get those stories out. They identified the underlying values that compelled them, named their aspirations for the future, and articulated the principles they believed in.

Over time, GPP and our Minnesota partners developed a methodology for naming a group's own ideological foundation – which we called the grounding narrative – and applying it to campaigns, issues, and events.

Starting in 2017, Our Minnesota Future (OMF), a 22-member coalition that brought together many of the state's largest and most powerful membership organizations, demonstrated the potential of this approach. OMF developed a shared narrative strategy, identified common themes to promote, and then used the 2018 election season to systematically advance their values and aspirations in the public conversation. The coalition's final communications project in the weeks before the election

shaped the environment in which voters went to the polls and helped bring about a decisive victory for progressive and Democratic candidates.

I've learned a number of lessons in the last sixteen years. Narrative strategy proved to be extremely effective at building power. It also turned out to require the investment of time, money, and resources. Like almost anything, it works better when it is done strategically and consistently. It holds more potential when multiple organizations collaborate to challenge the dominant narrative. Like other new approaches, undertaking narrative strategy can bring about unintended consequences that may require attention, such as revealing existing fissures within organizations or coalitions.

I often ask, "what's the next edge of the work?" First, we can and must do a better job of presenting alternatives to neoliberalism. The free market economic framework was the impetus that pushed Minnesota's social movement organizations to address the ideological sphere of power in the first place. While we still have much work to do here, the mounting crises and failures of neoliberalism have brought us to a place of opportunity, where we can begin to reimagine a political economy from the ground up. Second, movement advocates can do a better job of connecting our work with culture and meaning, to nurture and feed ourselves on this long journey of power and hope.

Vaclav Havel wrote that hope is the "ability to work for something because it is good." When Minnesota's community leaders come together with colleagues and friends and talk about a world of abundance or a state in which everyone is welcome, they are engaging in this deep and powerful form of hope. And by acting with hope, they have made more good things possible.

At the intersection of power and hope: Narrative change in Minnesota

In the 1990s, Minnesota's progressive organizations ran up against an obstacle they didn't know how to overcome. The state's unions, community-based organizations, and social justice advocates were successful at passing a hate crimes bill, expanding workplace rights for LGBT people, and putting the state on a path to renewable energy. They were skilled at creating powerful organizational coalitions and mobilizing grassroots members to take action for what they believed in. But over time, it became harder and harder to win policy changes, even when they had broad popular support. For example, a progressive effort to invest in K-12 education foundered, even with a moderate Republican governor elected on a campaign of education reform. Neither the teachers' union nor the Democratic legislature would support the tax increase necessary to pay for education funding.

Something had changed, and social movements needed to evolve in response.

While grassroots leaders were painting banners, holding press conferences, and faxing our elected officials, the ideology of neoliberalism had arrived in Minnesota.

Increasingly, when progressive advocates proposed regulatory changes or public investments, one response dominated the conversation. Corporations and their allies in the legislature warned the change would be bad for the business climate. And if it hurt businesses, then it was bad for Minnesota. Within the constraints of this ideological framework, it was all but impossible to advance meaningful policy change to improve equity, protect the environment, expand democracy or invest in under-resourced communities. It was the business climate argument, and the worldview it represented, that doomed the education funding proposal.

It was time for a new approach.

One Path to Narrative Strategy

I had moved to Minnesota in the fall of 1987 to merge my passions with my job. After a career as a systems analyst in small-town Central Pennsylvania, I chose to dedicate my time to my emerging passion: community organizing. I helped found the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action or MAPA—a coalition of labor, community, environmental, and civil rights groups. The organization was an experiment in amassing power across organizations and across issues.

At MAPA, we started referring to the emergent free-market ideology as the “dominant framework,” because it affected all the work of all the groups in our social movement ecosystem. Like many social justice advocates, we responded to the pro-business landscape by trying to “message” better and later to “frame” our work. These trendy concepts were supported by foundations and trainers, and they were useful. But neither messaging nor framing addressed the underlying intellectual paradigm we were up against – a neoliberal ideology that was growing in strength among elected leaders from both major political parties, the media, and even many of our allies in the non-profit world.

So when I left MAPA in 2000, I decided to help organizations tackle this challenge, though I still wasn't sure how. A former colleague invited me to a training offered by the Grassroots Policy Project. Suddenly it all made sense. Halfway through the training, I turned to her and said, “You were right; this is what we were trying to figure out at MAPA.” The game had changed, I realized, and if we wanted to win real changes, our understanding of power and the strategies we employed had to change as well.

Three Faces of Power

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote that “power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change.” This might be straightforward for a community group that wants to put a stop sign on a street corner or make small reforms, but for social movement organizations with visions of transformation, it isn't clear what it means to build an adequate level of power. To help conceptualize power in a tangible way, Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) developed a framework grounded in the writings of political theorist Steven Lukes. The organization called it the Three Faces of Power, and it was the starting point for our later work on narrative.

The first face of power describes the work of running campaigns to make concrete changes in people's lives. An organization building the first face of power might run policy campaigns, support candidates for elected office, carry out direct action, or hire a lawyer to take legal action.

The second face of power involves building the infrastructure to set the political agenda and determine what is considered viable and what is not. In this arena of power, organizations work to expand their membership base and develop strong member leaders. They develop coalitions and forge alignment with partners. They might also establish their own think tanks and movement media.

The third face of power is the arena where we contest for meaning. It is the arena of worldview and ideology. Using narrative strategy, organizations identify a set of core values and beliefs and

use them to shift the public conversation. It is this third face of power that Abraham Lincoln had in mind when he said, “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he [sic.] who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”

This three-part framework helped communities working for social change develop a deeper understanding of what they were up against and what they needed to build. The third face, in particular, helped them appreciate the role of narrative strategy. Convinced that this was the key to addressing the toxic neoliberal ideology, I began working with GPP and training Minnesota movement organizations to use narratives to build power and promote social change.

Unmasking Dominant Narratives

In order to help people understand the power of words, we developed workshops designed to expose the pervasive worldview we were up against. This worldview or ideology was grounded in four main ideas:

- People are solely responsible for themselves and what happens to them.
- Government is bad or at best inept, and is not a vehicle for making our lives better.
- Markets are where people can improve their lives and must be allowed to operate unfettered.
- Institutional forms of oppression like structural racism and sexism have been eliminated; all that remains is individual bias.

This dominant worldview draws power from the stories and narratives that emerge when the individual themes are woven together. So, for example, to explain the disproportionate number of black families living in poverty, one narrative might explain that some individuals have simply failed to pick themselves up by their bootstraps. According to this logic, government poverty programs have created dependency and undermined self-reliance. This way of conceptualizing the intersection of poverty and racism ignores structural factors, blames those who live in poverty, and refuses to consider solutions that might address underlying conditions.

When we ran workshops, participants had no difficulty understanding how this narrative – which influenced public discussions and policy decisions – was a form of power. It limited the change that policy-makers would consider and constrained the imagination of grassroots leaders. It made it harder to organize members. And, community organizers had to admit, it even got into their own heads so they found themselves reinforcing this narrative in an attempt to navigate it.

For example, one organization in another state was working on a policy proposal to reduce the cost of prescription drugs. The policy did not require additional revenue, which was attractive in a “no new taxes” era. But at a major rally at the capitol, the advocates of this policy change literally led with “This proposal will not increase your taxes.” It was a defensive argument which inadvertently reinforced the idea that taxes were bad. Since they ultimately wanted to promote government-supported health care, the organization had unknowingly shot themselves in the foot.

Once we knew what to look for, examples of reinforcing the dominant narrative surfaced everywhere. Some advocates referred to people receiving public benefits as “customers” and government as a business. Others proposed policies that benefited people’s lives as a good “economic investment.” When arguing on behalf of tax reductions for low-income people, some community leaders repeated phrases like “tax relief” or “tax breaks.” Many predominantly white groups shied away from discussing systemic racism. In each instance, well-meaning people tapped into ways of thinking and speaking that reinforced the power they were trying to fight.

The power of the dominant narrative often prevented community-based organizations from taking advantage of potential organizing opportunities. In 2001 when Enron declared bankruptcy and again in 2008 when the banking crisis rocked Wall Street, the story that carried the day was about the “bad apples” and the “bad decisions” they made. By implication, the economic system was solid and didn’t need fundamental change. For the most part, groups working for economic justice failed to offer proposals for systemic change because, in part, we had unintentionally accepted that story.

Elevating New Narratives

Once people understood the power of the dominant worldview, it was obvious that they needed to surface their own values and beliefs to undergird their work. The groups we worked with were pretty good at naming the values they held: community, interdependence, dignity of all people, and more. But it wasn’t clear what that meant for strategy. How would they begin to shift the dominant worldview? What were the practical steps they could take?

One experiment that held some promise was my early work with ISIAAH, a faith-based grassroots organization. As they approached the 2004 elections and the 2005 legislative sessions, ISIAAH’s staff and leaders began to talk about changing the dominant public conversation, which was based in scarcity, fear, and isolation, to one grounded in the values of abundance, hope, and community. In the fall of 2004 ISIAAH organized their largest ever public event of 4,000 people – nearly tripling previous turnout. They structured this massive public forum around the shift in values. Every presentation was grounded in abundance, hope, and community, as seen through a faith lens.

A few months later, during the 2005 legislative session, ISAIAH's leaders were working with a coalition of groups to increase public education funding. Governor Tim Pawlenty had taken the “no new taxes” pledge, a nefarious tactic of those advancing a small-government, neoliberal agenda. As the session came near the end, the governor attempted to drive a wedge among progressive forces by offering to take funding from health care programs to fund education. But ISAIAH had spent the previous year advancing the value of abundance. Their leaders were clear, as a result of our work together, that there was enough to go around in this wealthy state, and that scarcity was a myth that served a political purpose. As a result, they were able to convince their allies to hold firm and reject the deal being offered. In the end, the final budget included funding for both health care and education.

There had been concern that ISAIAH's suburban base would resist the calls for increased funding ... and taxes. Many of them seemed to be more ideologically conservative. But by starting with the idea that “God has given us all that we need,” ISAIAH's leaders were able to argue persuasively that sacrificing one human need for another violated their faith. The myth of scarcity was feeding fear and isolation: abundance was the path to hope and community. This conversation took place in many congregations, where it began to lessen the stranglehold of the dominant worldview.

Developing Aspirational Narratives

In 2009 the St. Paul Federation of Teachers, now the Saint Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE), asked me to work with them. At the time, teachers and support personnel were feeling bullied by relentless attacks on public education. Demoralized, educators typically either hid from the attacks or argued with their critics – which actually gave additional life to the forces they were fighting. I worked with Saint Paul educators to unpack the narrative that was being told about them and develop a narrative that set them up for success.

There were legitimate problems in the schools, especially related to outcomes for students of color, but critics of public education were using those difficulties to indict teachers, unions, and public education as a whole. The public conversation was filled with these messages:

- Teacher unions protect bad teachers.
- Teachers are greedy.
- Public education is a black hole for tax money.
- The role of public education is to produce children who can compete in the world.
- Choice in schools creates a free market of education which will improve quality and equality.
- The achievement gap is so complicated that teachers and administrators really just don't know what to do.
- There is a silver bullet (a product, intervention, or curriculum) that can solve the achievement gap.

The charge was led by self-named “education reformers” who were largely funded by corporate interests. Many of them had a not-so-hidden agenda of undermining public schools and teachers’ unions. The process of naming this dominant narrative and how it affected them was surprisingly liberating for the teachers and staff I worked with. They had heard this discourse for years, but exposing it as a story that was deliberately shaped for a political purpose helped them understand that they could tell a different story.

We then worked to develop a new narrative for teachers, educators and public education. In one workshop, I invited them to reflect on why they chose their profession and why they stayed with it. Then together they crafted a list of shared beliefs:

- We are committed to building a good society.
- We believe in honoring and cultivating each student’s potential.
- Working in community is essential to student success.
- Educating students is a craft that requires talented and committed professionals.
- We are committed to working collectively as a powerful force for justice, change, and democracy.

This new narrative was not a direct response to the dominant narrative, but came instead from the deepest beliefs and aspirations of the leaders of this union. As a result, it resonated deeply with their members and many people in the local community.

Over the last ten years, the members of SPFE have used these beliefs as the foundation for advocacy, communications, and contract negotiations. They used this narrative as a starting point for building the leadership of union members and forging stronger community relationships. Thanks in part to this narrative, Saint Paul’s union local became a national leader among teacher unions who have shifted their primary focus from pay and working conditions to student learning: reducing class sizes, increasing the number of school support personnel (nurses, librarians and social workers), and implementing restorative justice practices in the school to end the expulsions that were pushing so many students of color out of the classroom.

Growing Narrative Strategy

From 2010 to 2017 I worked closely with SPFE, ISAIAH, TakeAction Minnesota, and the Land Stewardship Project. I also trained staff and leaders at three locals of the Service Employees International Union and the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha.

As I came to understand how values and aspirations could be a potent force for change, I helped groups develop a values-centered, aspirational story for themselves. We called this the grounding

narrative, because I encouraged organizations to use these statements as a foundation, and to ground all their work in this expression of their beliefs and dreams.

In order to develop a shared grounding narrative, I worked with staff and grassroots members first to explore their own personal values and aspirations and then answer questions like these collectively:

- What are the purpose and value of people and communities?
- What are the purpose and value of land, soil, water, air, natural resources?
- Within our society, what roles do corporations, markets, and public institutions (including government) serve?
- What values do we want to uphold and why?

The grounding narrative of ISAIAH, a congregation-based community organizing group, included the assertions that “God sees the divine in each of us. God sees us equally. We ALL belong to God.” Staff and leaders at the Land Stewardship Project, which organizes farmers and rural people, agreed that “the health and well-being of the land and of all people are interconnected. Physical and spiritual health, for both people and the planet, rely on respect for the earth as a whole creation, not merely a collection of parts.”

Organizations also learned to apply these narratives to specific campaigns by creating what we called narrative frames. Communications expert George Lakoff had urged advocates to frame the issue of the day in terms of the messages they wanted to disseminate. Now we used similar language for the process of using deep values and aspirations (as embodied in the grounding narrative) as a structure to reassemble and conceptualize the details of a given issue. Framing links an event, campaign, or issue to underlying values, so advocates take advantage of every opportunity to promote their own worldview, and avoid getting lost in the details of their opponents’ terminology and logic. A narrative frame answers the questions:

- What are the core values being violated and what is the cause of that violation?
- How will this campaign eliminate (or reduce) that violation?
- What is the aspiration for the future that this campaign achieves, or at least works toward?

Each campaign may have multiple frames, and a set of campaigns (or issues) might have common frames which tie them together.

Once we had developed the grounding narrative and the narrative frames, we proceeded to use these tools to shift the public conversation. First, we **unmasked the dominant narrative** when it inevitably appeared. Members, staff, and communicators would call out the dominant narrative and name the underlying principle for what it was.

Second, we **elevated elements of the organization's grounding narrative**. Communications staff could voice these values and beliefs, and so could grassroots members, who we trained to tell their personal stories through the lens of the aspirational narrative.

Third, we **offered a choice**. We found that it didn't work to say the dominant narrative was wrong and the grounding narrative was right. People tended to double down on the views they already held. Instead, we invited people to reflect on their own values and consider which principles they wanted their community to embody. We offered narrative change as an invitation, not an argument.

The organizations we worked with found the narrative process strengthened their members' commitment, opened up conversations that were previously locked in partisan politics, and befuddled elected representatives who were used to arguing about policy within an assumed set of values. For example, one organization invited public officials to a public forum, and instead of the expected "will you support" questions, asked their representatives about their values and how they would apply the values to the issues at hand. Several of the lawmakers on the podium went out for drinks afterward to figure out what had just happened. They were mystified by this new kind of conversation and didn't know how to approach it.

During this period a number of challenges also emerged. Resources were limited in most organizations – both in communications and in organizing – and the work of narrative strategy didn't fit into established budget categories. There was virtually no money available for paid communications. When people felt there was no other way forward, they could build the will to invest in this novel way of thinking, planning, and taking action. But when the political winds changed and victory seemed closer at hand, it was easy to drift back into old practices.

Furthermore, while individual organizations developed their own narratives and narrative strategy, there was little coordinated effort around changing the dominant worldview. The work that took place typically focused on changing the story around a specific campaign, but failed to link the same narrative across campaigns.

One beautiful application of narrative strategy that showcased the power of working across organizations was the 2012 campaign to defeat a constitutional amendment that would have limited marriage to relationships between a man and a woman. Campaign strategists ran a sophisticated narrative campaign that many organizations took up.

The proposal was put on the ballot by a Republican legislature. Initial polling and the experience of other states indicated it was likely to pass. In similar cases, opponents had argued that marriage was a right, but this language had not overcome public hesitance about same-sex marriage. So

campaign strategists decided to change the narrative. Opponents of the amendment wanted to avoid a legalistic debate on right and wrong and instead engage people in their own understanding of marriage. Opinion research done elsewhere suggested it would be persuasive to celebrate love as the underlying value. The ultimate question became, “should people be able to marry the person they love?”

This shift in narrative informed everything, from house meetings to phone calls to paid and earned media. Opponents won against the odds. Even more amazing: the narrative they advanced helped the next legislature (Democratic but not necessarily inclined to legalize gay marriage) do exactly that. Love became the law.

Our Minnesota Future: An Experiment in Collaborative Narrative Strategy

In 2017, 22 progressive organizations joined forces under the umbrella Our Minnesota Future (OMF). A handful had been doing narrative work, and a number of others had been exposed to GPP’s framework and understood the importance of this work. Some had no experience with the three faces of power or the value of narrative strategy.

These groups developed a shared strategy in the context of the 2018 election, a landmark election which included the first open race for the governor’s seat in eight years, multiple competitive contests for other statewide offices, and the election of all members of the state House of Representatives. The partners laid out three interconnected goals: change the public narratives that shaped election campaigns and public policy, influence the candidates (especially for governor) by articulating a coherent set of policies and worldview, and develop a co-governance approach to working with the eventual winner. This approach exemplified the work of narrative change (and offered some useful lessons).

Starting with core values

Much of the OMF narrative strategy development and implementation during 2018 was coordinated by a shared communications table, with support from the Narrative Initiative and GPP. An early decision was made to keep this group from being one more place where communicators faced deadlines and deliverables and to focus instead on communication strategy, specifically strategies for changing the popular narrative.

After an initial training, participants identified a few core narrative themes to promote, both collectively

and in their work as individual organizations. The themes, which became known as Minnesota Values, were drawn from the existing grounding narratives of five of the member organizations.

- **Everybody in, nobody out, no exceptions.** We are all born with innate dignity; we all deserve to have the opportunity for a life of dignity. No one gets seconds until everyone gets firsts.
- **Compassion and care toward each other.** We start with compassion in figuring out how we treat each other and the world we live in and how we address what people need to thrive. We use this in addressing past harm or people who do harm.
- **Interconnectedness and interdependency among all of us and with the natural world.** We all do better when we all do better. A harm to one is a harm to all.
- **Public institutions should serve people first and engage them as decision-makers.** The only way to make sure our government benefits all of us is to make sure we all have a voice in its decisions. We, the people, must be the deciders about institutions that affect our lives.

These statements were not intended to be a full shared narrative. Nor were they intended as messages to be repeated over and over. Instead they were themes that each organization would promote throughout the year, in tandem with its own values, beliefs, or grounding narrative. The aim was to tie all the candidates and all the issues to these themes, during the coming election and the legislative session to follow. A true act of hope!

Capacity and resources

The reality of inadequate resources had limited narrative strategy for many years. Many organizations lacked communications staff. The communications directors in OMF groups typically ran from press briefing to public action to writing a press statement and then started all over the next day. Few OMF members had figured out how to integrate narrative change work into their campaign and organizing strategies.

In 2017 the newly emerging Narrative Initiative (NI) addressed this obstacle head on, when it decided to target resources in Minnesota to elevate the work on narrative change. This investment added significant capacity to the state's progressive movement, in four ways. First, NI hired a program manager with communications and organizing experience and assigned him to support the work in Minnesota. Second, TakeAction Minnesota dedicated its communications director to staffing and running the new narrative and communications table, coordinating communications across OMF. Third, half of my time was redirected to help OMF with their narrative change work. And finally, NI hired a national communications company to help with research, trainings (in-person and webinars), and rapid response tactics.

On a parallel track, several organizations hired Anat Shenker-Osorio to help them navigate the new

political waters of the Trump era. Should organizations and campaigns focus strictly on economic issues? Should they call out racism in its many forms? Or could they somehow develop an approach to the election that was grounded in both race and class? Shenker-Osorio's research was designed to answer these questions.

Activities

During 2018, OMF organizations deployed their coordinated narrative strategy to transform the public conversation in Minnesota, often using tactics unusual for an election year. OMF members used public actions and statements to promote the core Minnesota Values themes. Some of them held actions designed to illustrate the idea that we are all interconnected, across race and geography. Specific events brought together farmers, small business owners, and people of color to create unity across differences and challenge the politically motivated claim that the state had an unreconcilable divide between urban and rural residents.

When acts of hate or divisiveness emerged, the allies responded rapidly. For example, a number of member groups responded to the revived Muslim Ban with media actions that linked the ban to the experiences of their own constituencies, such as Muslim schoolchildren (Saint Paul Federation of Educators) or LGBT Muslims (OutFront Minnesota), always within the narrative framework they had agreed on.

OMF members used the campaign season as an opportunity to amplify Minnesota Values themes. They hosted candidate forums or conversations with candidates that focused less on specific policy questions and more on how candidates might act out of their own values and work with community groups after the election.

At the same time, OMF members integrated narrative work into their organizing. Some introduced the framework of "values-centered" organizing, in which organizers and leaders developed campaigns by building on fundamental values. In particular, they constructed campaigns that responded to violations of publicly identified values and sought short-term victories that might make future campaigns possible. For example, TakeAction Minnesota and partners advocated for earned sick and safe time, on the grounds that being forced to work when one or one's family is sick violates the basic dignity of working people. They used their communications resources to elevate a fundamental value that could be the foundation of future campaigns. Additionally, by training organizers on narrative work, organizations challenged the idea that communications was strictly the job of people who had 'communications' in their title. A couple of groups even undertook internal restructuring to integrate communications more closely with organizing and campaign staff.

Narrative also merged with leadership development. Several organizations expanded their communications capacity by training grassroots members to share their personal stories and develop their own social media following. OMF convened grassroots members from across the state, over several sessions, to take leadership roles in a “people-centered democracy” exercise of developing recommendations for the incoming governor.

Greater than Fear

Anat Shenker-Osorio's research concluded that a combined race/class narrative could motivate and persuade voters in an era of partisan rancor. Through canvasses, focus groups, and polling, she and her team landed on a way to talk to voters that encouraged people to reject divisive “dog whistle” racism and come together to build a more prosperous Minnesota. Organizations working with Shenker-Osorio embodied this messaging in a campaign called [Greater than Fear](#) during the last weeks of the election cycle.

Greater than Fear grew directly out of the narrative work OMF members had been carrying out. In an election where some candidates were intent on seeding fear and division, this narrative strategy offered an alternate set of values. It connected implicitly to the grounding narratives of organizations and the core Minnesota Values themes of OMF. And it brought in the resources for powerful paid and earned media.

Outcomes

The election of 2018 was a big success for the OMF partners. Minnesota elected a governor who felt accountable to the coalition, implemented some of their suggestions to restructure government, and appointed many people recommended by OMF to leadership positions. The Democratic-Farm-Labor Party won a majority in the Minnesota House. In 2019, The House majority proposed a Minnesota Values Agenda that mirrored many of the demands of OMF organizations, as did the governor's proposed budget.

There were less tangible benefits as well. The capacity of many member organizations increased during the year, and OMF's collective capacity and coordination grew tremendously. The alignment built its shared communications capacity, organizing capacity, and capacity to develop and carry out narrative strategies. This spring, the communications and narrative table morphed into an ongoing Narrative Justice League and invited more organizations to implement an even more powerful and large-scale narrative strategy.

Looking Back

For the past 16 years, as I have observed Minnesota's social justice movement figure out how to change the public conversation, I have been fortunate to work alongside people who believe they can reshape the public world to embody their deepest values. I have witnessed people from all walks of life, acting together, to make changes that no one but they thought possible. This journey has fed my hope for the future. It has also yielded a number of lessons.

Narrative strategy builds power. This was always the theory when we started, but it has been proven over and over again. Including narrative change in the mission of an organization can expand its membership base and develop a larger, more powerful set of leaders. It moves people to act out of hope. When you nurture imagination, you also open up creative thinking.

By including narrative change strategies, communities are able to win more in the short run and make bigger changes possible in the future. Narrative strategy helps build the connective tissue across issues and across organizations. It strengthens a sense of “we.” In these ways (and many others), our work to change the public conversation helps win campaigns and strengthen movement infrastructure. (In GPP's framework, the third face of power strengthens the first and second faces.)

Successful narrative strategy requires intentionality, capacity, and resources. Like individuals, organizations will rarely change what they do unless they have to. Being hungry for something more is the first and critical step. Once you are clear you want something different, then you also need to be intentional and deliberate about making change. Over time, organizations need to be disciplined about examining their assumptions and integrating narrative strategy into all aspects of their work, engaging all staff and member leaders. Vast resources and capacities we can barely understand promote and propel the dominant narrative. Advocates of social change have to build on what we have—primarily people. Despite the fickle nature of philanthropy, we must make a long-term commitment to this work.

Narrative change is a strategic process that requires tools and goals. One of the biggest misunderstandings I see is the idea that narratives are a tactical tool. This assumption usually shows up in the realm of messaging and framing. While smart messaging can be useful, it fails to advance the more ambitious aspiration of narrative work – to change the meta-narrative that affects all of us and makes our dreams more or less possible. In order to dream big and make a practical difference, movement organizations need to set clear narrative change goals to work toward, and then create an explicit document that lays out foundational values, beliefs, and aspirations. This written narrative should be more than a list of values, but brief enough to be useful as a tool (about a page).

Of course, a piece of paper is worthless if it doesn't change daily practice. At GPP, we encourage organizations to return regularly to this grounding narrative to create narrative frames about each campaign. Ideally this is done before a campaign is developed, through a values-centered approach, so the organization's deep values and aspirations are baked into the campaign from the start.

So that the focus on narrative doesn't fade, it helps to set goals about how to keep these values and themes alive in an organization. Some organizations integrate the narrative into each interaction with members. Others shape upcoming campaigns to advance narrative change and then track how well the organization's communications embody this strategy. I've seen organizations pick a specific aspect of their narrative (like human dignity) and spend a year or two linking everything they do to that narrative element.

Deep collaboration is needed to shift dominant narratives over time. No single campaign or organization can shift the major narratives of a given cultural period. You may be able to change the language around a specific issue or even across a few campaigns, but the dominant narrative – backed as it is by billions of dollars of corporate power – is resilient and tends to reassert itself or coopt new language.

To transform our communities, states and nations requires sustained narrative strategy, over time, by many collaborating groups and individuals. This may seem a fool's errand, but if we cede power in the arena of narrative we have limited the possibilities for the future. If we believe our visions for the future are good, then we can embody the transformative power of hope by holding them out and working towards them.

Doing something new will provoke tensions. Different people in an organization will embrace change in different ways. Organizers, for example, often learn to limit the aspirations of grassroots leaders in the name of managing expectations, but narrative strategy explicitly encourages leaders to dream big and aspire freely. Not everyone needs to be on board before a process of narrative change begins, but you do need enough people with a hunger for change and the power to make it happen. Then it is important to keep bringing people along.

Communications departments often face competing needs. It's important to feed the aspirations of the base while remaining sufficiently credible to people who hear the message through mass media. There may be a tension between trying to win a campaign and accomplishing a longer-term goal of shifting narrative. In my experience, the key is to hold these competing needs and figure out paths that are both/and.

Communicators have another balance to strike. On the one hand, changing the public conversation

demands repeating narratives and messages over and over so they can take hold with a wider audience. On the other, staff and leaders often get bored and are ready to move on and talk about something new, long before the narrative has reached saturation point. This balancing act doesn't exist for corporations using paid advertising, but can be tricky for a grassroots organization that wants to use real people to articulate narratives in an authentic way.

Another tension is the temptation to react to the dominant narrative whenever it arises. A good written narrative can provide the clarity to help communities pivot to the story they want to tell.

Doing narrative work with a coalition presents its own unique challenges. Different organizations come to a collaborative project with different resources and varied levels of experience, which can make it difficult for smaller or newer organizations to participate fully in the shared strategy of narrative change. When it comes to developing unifying statements, it's ideal if each participant has already had the opportunity to develop clarity about its own values, beliefs, and aspirations. When OMF was developing its shared themes, only a few members had done a full narrative development process. Many groups of color disliked the idea of “everyone in, nobody out,” because it evoked the same sentiments as “all lives matter.” Coalition partners encouraged them to use their own language and not treat it as messaging, but the issue created friction that might have been reduced if all the groups had been fully briefed on the theoretical framework and been supported to develop their own organizational narratives. If all the participants had similar levels of preparation, the resulting narrative would have been more representative and inclusive.

Looking Ahead

People who have worked with me know that I often ask, “what's the next edge of the work?” There is tremendous opportunity to grow this work in Minnesota and beyond. I want to highlight two specific needs that are emerging.

Deepening our narrative about public institutions and the economy

Since the 1990s, social movement actors in Minnesota and elsewhere have improved our ability to talk about the limits of the current economic order and elevate our own values. But we have failed to develop narratives adequate to the magnitude of the challenges we face. The neoliberal narratives that continue to dominate our public conversation prevent us from taking urgent action to address the climate breakdown, for example, or tackle the crisis of long-term care for seniors. In order to make transformative change, then, we need to develop a much deeper story about government and the economy.

We don't have to know all the mechanisms or sketch out an alternative economic order to neoliberalism. But we do need to name some real aspirations. This is a hard conversation because the free market economy has so captured our imagination that it is difficult to think outside the box.

But the opportunity is in front of us. Few people today, regardless of political affiliation, believe the government or the economy is working well. This crisis offers an opportunity for bold activists and leaders to offer a way forward or engage others in imagining how the world might be different. Narrative strategy is aspirational by design, so it's a great place to start.

We can be much more deliberate about giving people experiences that help them glimpse a new world. Those who have never experienced governing at any level can't be expected to believe that people-centered governance is possible. But we can, for example, create opportunities for grassroots community members to be involved in decision-making, which will nurture the belief that change is possible.

Tapping Into our whole selves

Historically, people's movements have used music, art, poetry, and similar experiences to open imagination and help people keep their eyes on the prize. I've only occasionally experienced this deep cultural connection to social movements, and it's not the kind of work I've learned to do. But I know that the work of social change is not just intellectual; it is emotional and spiritual as well. When people take time to lift up their core values and aspirations, it is liberating, exhilarating, and spiritual. We need to find ways to sustain those moments, to nurture and feed ourselves on this long journey of power and hope.

Conclusion

A lot has changed in Minnesota since the 1990s. The progressive movement today is far stronger, which has both enabled and resulted from the growing ability of social justice organizations to compete in the arena of public narrative. As women, communities of color, unions, immigrants, LGBT people, farmers, people of faith, and others have challenged the dominance of the "business climate" argument, Minnesotans have begun to see that they have a choice. We haven't won, but we have widened the debate: policy ideas that wouldn't have seen the light of day a decade or two ago are now being seriously discussed, and some are becoming law. Candidates for public office have begun to reject the neoliberal narrative. And the public square now offers more room for the voices of real people, the people who rely on public programs or who are most affected by systems of injustice. There is a shift in power underway.

“Hope is a state of mind, not of the world,” wrote Vaclav Havel. “Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good.” When Minnesota’s community leaders come together with colleagues and friends and talk about a world of abundance or a state in which everyone is welcome, they are engaging in this deep and powerful form of hope. And by acting with hope, they have made more good things possible.

About David Mann

David Mann has worked for progressive social change in Minnesota for 32 years. In 1987 he co-founded and later directed the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action which ran grassroots issue and electoral campaigns. He has deep experience with grassroots organizing and education, coalition building, leadership development, strategy development, organizational management, and organizational development. For the past 16 years, most recently as a Senior Strategist with the Grassroots Policy Project, Mann has worked in partnership with community and labor organizations to develop the concrete short-term plans and the essential long-term strategies (including narrative change) necessary to realize their dreams.

About the Grassroots Policy Project

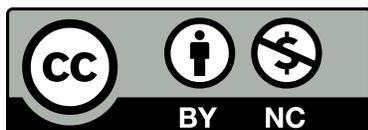
For more than twenty years, Grassroots Policy Project has supported social justice organizing with labor unions, congregation-based organizations and community organizers. Throughout our history we have mined the best ideas from the social sciences to help organizers be more thoughtful, sophisticated, and strategic about their work. We encourage organizations to shift their approach from transactional to transformational, from short-term victories to a longer time horizon, from a one-dimensional to a multi-dimensional model of power, from avoiding issues of race to placing them at the center of how we think of politics and economics, and most recently, from ignoring gender to integrating feminist analysis into their work. Interest in our frameworks has grown rapidly over the past six years, and we now have multiple opportunities to work with social justice groups in almost every movement sector. For more information on GPP, please visit <https://grassrootspolicy.org/>.

About the Narrative Initiative

Narrative Initiative catalyzes durable narrative change in order to make equity and social justice common sense. We make connections between people and organizations, amplify the best tools and methodologies from an emerging field, and activate new collaborations that lead to greater alignment. Narrative Initiative builds on the history of narrative change work by bridging grassroots organizing, communications, political advocacy, culture change, art, research, and technology in order to make collective meaning. For more about us, please visit <https://narrativeinitiative.org/>.

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