



**GRASSROOTS
POLICY PROJECT**



Photo by Kristine Leuze

A NARRATIVE OF **RURAL ABUNDANCE**

A Case Study of Land Stewardship Project's Narrative Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Photo by Kristine Leuze

Land Stewardship Project (LSP) has been working to change the public conversation for three and a half decades. Founded in 1982, the organization has used theatrical productions, rural gatherings and a quarterly print newsletter to give voice to a worldview that is simultaneously old-fashioned and revolutionary. During the decades that corporate agriculture came to dominate the landscape of the Midwest, the organizers and members of Land Stewardship Project have stood for the integrity of the land, care for the natural world, the value of small farmers, and the importance of rural communities. They have helped farmers stay on land that had been in their family for generations and trained young people who have never worked the land to launch their own sustainable farms.

In 2015, with assistance from Dave Mann of the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP), the organization undertook a lengthy process to be more intentional about how it built power. While LSP was winning many individual campaigns and implementing programs to support sustainable food and farming systems, their work didn't add up to the kind of far-reaching changes they aspired to. The organization wanted to use its words and actions to challenge the reigning free market ideology and promote a positive vision of rural Minnesota, built on the deeply held values of farmers and their rural neighbors. The succeeding process of narrative development helped LSP's grassroots leaders and staff be more deliberate and strategic about how they intervened in the public discussion.

Almost twenty years earlier, the Grassroots Policy Project had formulated what they called "three faces of power," a way to conceptualize the different arenas of struggle in which social movement organizations could build strength. The first face referred to organizing people and resources for direct political involvement in visible decision-making arenas; the second to building political

infrastructure by developing leaders, recruiting a grassroots base, and cultivating organizational networks. The third face of power was ideological: contesting for the power of public opinion. This tripartite distinction pointed organizers to the importance of the realm of meaning, ideas, language, and narrative as a space for struggle. By the time LSP committed to work with GPP on the development of a coherent narrative strategy, Dave Mann had already honed a thoughtful process for helping communities expose the dominant worldview that upheld the current economic and political order and refine visionary narratives that could propel their work.

Working on narrative, as GPP understood it, goes beyond efforts at “messaging” and “framing.” If messaging is a reformist effort, tinkering around the edges with discussions in the public square, narrative work is explicitly revolutionary and transformative. If messaging is immediate and short-term, aiming to grab the day’s headlines, narrative work is subversive and long-term, aspiring to win the battle of public opinion over the course of years or decades. By undertaking a project of narrative strategy, the staff and leaders at Land Stewardship Project set themselves an ambitious goal: to transform the wider public conversation, bring about a shift in the cultural landscape, and make possible a new array of concrete changes that could make life better for Minnesota’s rural residents.

Over the winter of 2015-16, LSP hosted a series of gatherings for 47 leaders and six staff members to develop its own foundational narrative. Participants got a crash course on narrative: what it is, how it can limit or propel your work, and how you can intervene in the narratives of your community to make change. They worked together to name first the dominant narratives they wanted to challenge and then the narrative they wanted to elevate. In subsequent exercises, they sorted and synthesized these ideas, stories, and values into powerful statements. Organizers and leaders from different campaigns applied the general principles to their specific issue work. And ultimately, at a leadership gathering of more than forty people, Land Stewardship Project’s members and staff committed to using this new ideological framework in all their work: selecting and waging campaigns, outreach to new members, training programs, newsletters, social media, and lobbying.

In some ways, the process of narrative development was the easiest step. The next and more difficult part was using those narratives, day in and day out, and incorporating them into the organization’s ongoing work. LSP had an unlikely advantage. Without a large communications department, there was no place to ghettoize the narrative. Instead, staff and leaders throughout the organization began to use and apply the language that came out of the narrative development process. And because even bright flames can die out, LSP devoted personnel to maintain and drive its ongoing narrative strategy.

The benefits of developing and deploying this narrative were enormous:

- The use of a coherent narrative, generated by grassroots members, helped leaders feel more connected to the organization.
- The narrative helped unify LSP, which is subdivided into a set of programs whose participants don't always interact with each other.
- In a period of political division and partisan rancor, a foundation of clearly articulated values helped the organization work across potential political fault lines.
- The narrative supported LSP's work on racial justice.
- Within an ecosystem of progressive organizations, LSP's narrative work strengthened their ability to collaborate with coalition partners. It helped that a number of allies were also going through similar processes of narrative development.
- Perhaps most centrally, narrative strategy helped LSP win campaigns by transforming what the public and decision-makers understood was possible and desirable.

Ultimately, narrative strategy offered LSP far more benefits than the list suggests. It opened up a new arena for building power and gave the organization a new vehicle with which to expand the victories that were possible.





INTRODUCTION

It's called the Driftless Area. At the intersection of Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota lies a 24,000 square-mile region that is geologically and geographically unique. Unlike the flat plains that cover most of the Midwest – dotted with lakes and planted with acre after acre of corn, soybeans, and barley – the Driftless Area wasn't smoothed flat by glaciers in the last ice age. Here, you'll find steep forested ridges, deeply carved river valleys, spring-fed waterfalls, and cold-water trout streams. The hillsides and creeks are a haven for biodiversity, providing a home to plants and animals that aren't seen elsewhere, including rare cliffside flowers and an endangered snail.

In 1949, American ecologist Aldo Leopold described his relationship to this landscape in the book *Sand County Almanac*. One of the

founders of the Wilderness Society, Leopold describes the first spring tracks of the skunk, the surprised motion of a meadow mouse, the sight of a rough-legged hawk sailing overhead, the calls of the wild geese. He analyzes the best way to chop wood for a fire and how to weather out a flood. He also discusses wilderness, hunting, conservation, and the commodification of the natural world. It is a beautiful, wise book, earning comparisons to Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. Published posthumously, the book became a bible for American conservationists (along with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*). Leopold's guiding ethic was the idea of harmony between people and the land: "A thing is right," he wrote, "when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

When the glaciers passed over, they left behind not just streams for trout fishing but also a unique kind of sand that turned out to be useful to the fossil fuel industry.

Seventy years later, the Driftless Area remains a site for conversation about the relationship between people and the land. When the glaciers passed over, they left behind not just streams for trout fishing but also a unique kind of sand that turned out to be useful to the fossil fuel industry. It's the same sand after which *Sand County Almanac* was named. Strong, round, evenly-sized particles of silica proved to be ideal for propping open tiny cracks in rock formations and releasing natural gas and oil reserves in the process known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. Today, Wisconsin produces two thirds of the nation's silica sand, a business that has doubled in the last decade.

The mines were lucrative for landowners and mining companies, but the local community was increasingly unhappy. Frac sand operations lopped off scenic mountain tops, obliterated beautiful bluffs and filled clear streams with heavy metals. At night, you could no longer see the stars, since miners working around the clock used stadium lights to illuminate the terrain. The noise kept children awake. Hundreds of times a day, noisy trucks belching diesel fumes, carrying tens of thousands of pounds of sand, rumbled past quiet households. Public health researchers warned

that frac sand was carcinogenic and could produce a fatal lung disease called silicosis. In 2011, as the industry boomed, eleven mines were proposed in Winona County in southeastern Minnesota.

Citizens took action. Neighbors fought mines proposed in Saratoga Township and Warren Township. The residents of St. Charles Township and the city of St. Charles joined forces to defeat a proposal for what would have been North America's largest frac sand processing plant. Angry residents dumped frac sand on the steps of Winona's city hall. More than one hundred people put their bodies on the road to stop the movement of frac sand trucks. In 2012, local residents called in the help of Land Stewardship Project (LSP), a statewide organization representing farmers and rural residents. LSP had experience blocking factory farms in Minnesota's rural townships. Over the next two years, community members working with LSP used the state's environmental review process to scrutinize the proposed mines and processing facilities. They held large-scale meetings and used the media to draw attention to the issue. One mine and one town at a time, they successfully stopped each of the eleven mines.

But the struggle was arduous. As the community confronted the mining interests, they found themselves involved in endless debates about cost-benefit analysis. Residents warned about the threats to public health. Mining companies touted the economic benefits. Elected representatives tried to weigh pros and cons, hammer out compromises, and draft regulations. Community mem-

bers worried regulations would be flouted and taxpayers would be left with the costs of monitoring, enforcement and clean-up. Though four out of five Winona residents opposed sand mining in their region, they felt exhausted fighting one mine at a time and powerless to win the argument against the massive corporate forces opposing them.

Then in the winter of 2015, Land Stewardship Project undertook an intensive project to develop a coherent narrative strategy. And slowly, the nature of the debate began to change.

The narrative project engaged farmers and rural residents from across Minnesota in a set of exercises to explore their most deeply held values and articulate them in a set of narrative statements about their principles and beliefs. Some of the ideals embodied in their summary document could have come from Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*:

We are rural Minnesotans. We love our communities and take pride in them, and we are stewards of the land and world around us. ... We are close to the land in rural communities, and caretakers of the world around us that nourishes us all. The soil and landscape, lakes and streams, plants and wildlife, and a stable climate all are critical, both because they sustain life and because they deserve respect on their own. ... We must protect and improve the world around us for the future, not abuse and exploit it.

The process of narrative development and the documents that emerged from it transformed the campaign in Winona County.

LSP organizer Johanna Rupprecht was working with local leaders to build the campaign against frac sand mining when she participated in the narrative development process. When she read the final draft of the statement of values, she says, "it took five times reading it before I could get through it without starting to cry. It was so emotionally resonant with what I thought but had never before seen written down on a piece of paper. So much of it connected to me with values I hold from having grown up on a sustainable farm and learned from my farming parents and my grandfather, who was a strong conservationist. Especially the inherent value of the land." When she and the other Winona County activists started to think about how these statements connected to their work on frac sand mining, they realized they needed to rethink their campaign.

In Winona County, activists were getting pulled into debates about property rights. Corporations claimed they had the legal right to extract sand from the land because they owned the property, and neighbors responded by documenting how the environmental destruction, noise, and light pollution undermined their property values. But with this argument, they now realized, they were conceding that land was nothing more than a commodity to be bought and sold. They had inadvertently capitulated to the worldview of those who wanted to extract economic value from the earth, heedless of other values. As organizer Rupprecht wrote later:

The dominant narrative... tells people things like "landowners have the right to do whatever they want with their land" and "anything that creates jobs and brings in money is good." It tells people they should oppose any government

action limiting “property rights.” Framed through this dominant narrative, the frac sand issue has often been presented as “environmentalists” opposing something that brings jobs and economic benefit.

After the exercises in narrative development, the Winona County leaders knew they had to change the story. While the public debate had focused narrowly on economic advantages and disadvantages, health outcomes, and jobs, the conversation had failed to “step back and ask if this is right or wrong,” Rupprecht says. But now, LSP did exactly that. They focused on the value

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of the land and its importance. “We pitched it at a more fundamental level. A fundamental question about what this [frac sand mining] represented, what was right or wrong for the community. And not just for the human community but also how we treat the land.” The work on narrative gave local residents permission to say something that had felt hard to say proudly and publicly: that they loved the land where they lived and didn’t want to see it destroyed. “Having that narrative made us stronger.” Armed with this narrative, they also vigorously pursued a bolder strategy, which had been proposed a

few months earlier: instead of fighting individual mines, one at a time, they now demanded an outright ban on frac sand mining.

During the summer of 2016, the county held hearings and invited written testimony on the proposed ban. LSP encouraged people to say that the land has inherent value, and that what harms the land also harms people and the whole community. Comments poured in, overwhelmingly supportive of an end to sand mining. A photographer circulated a collection of photos comparing the beauty of the local bluffs with the hideous scars left by mountain-top removal and sand mines in Wisconsin. At hearings, conservative farmers stood up and voiced concerns about unchecked corporate power. People described their connection to the valleys, creeks, and bluffs of the Driftless Area, and urged elected representatives to defend its biodiversity and natural beauty. They encouraged commissioners to protect the land for the future, so the next generation could enjoy it as well.

The new narrative helped mining opponents overcome another hurdle. County commissioners worried about impending lawsuits and considered regulating the industry instead of banning it. One proposed an ordinance that would have limited the number of mines. LSP realized they needed to call on the county to stand up for the convictions of residents, defend local democracy, and end frac sand mining altogether. One of the values contained in LSP’s narrative summary pledged a commitment to a state “where people have a say and shape our own future. ... We need community leaders and elected representatives who take guidance from us, and who act courageously in the best interests

of the people they serve." Armed with these values, the frac sand activists demanded their local government play a more active role. They called on their representatives to serve the people and protect the common good. Over and over, they challenged commissioners to rethink the messages industry was sending – that the public sector should get out of the way of private industry – and invited office holders to defend the public interest. "We said that the proper role of government is to listen to the will of the people and to protect the common good for both people and the land," wrote Rupprecht. They knew their work was effective when one commissioner dismissed worries about a possible lawsuit in a public statement: "I'd put more weight on the

public who has spoken at that podium ... than I do on a letter from an attorney in Minneapolis. We represent the citizens of Winona County as a whole and I think they've been clear."

In November 2016, the Winona County Board of Commissioners voted three to two to ban the mining, processing, or trans-loading of frac sand in the county. It was the first known countywide ban on the production of silica sand for hydraulic fracturing. Johanna Rupprecht was quoted in the [local paper](#): "This is local government acting the way it should," she said. "To protect the common good."

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Photo by Kristine Leuze



BACKGROUND: LSP'S PATH TO NARRATIVE

Land Stewardship Project has been working to change the public conversation for three and a half decades. Founded in 1982, the organization's core mission was to promote an ethic of stewardship for America's farmlands. "That's a narrative-oriented mission," says Executive Director Mark Schultz. The organization was created at a critical moment: in 1983, farms nationwide experienced the worst downturn in farming since the Great Depression. Exports plummeted with the Soviet grain embargo. When the Federal Reserve tightened monetary policy, the value of farmland fell by half in just a few years. Thousands of farmers faced ruin. Agricultural banks and makers of farming equipment were washed away. Banks foreclosed on property that had been farmed for generations by the same families, and corporate agribusiness bought it up.

Minnesota's farming families suffered a profound cultural trauma. As the farm crisis swept through, communities unraveled. Rates of violence and suicide spiked. LSP staff found themselves responding to desperate cries for help. In addition to helping farmers fight foreclosure and keep their land, organizers developed a traveling series of educational events similar to chautauquas, which combined expert speakers with community poets, musicians, writers, and other local cultural luminaries. At these gatherings, farmers gathered to talk about what was happening in their community and mourn the economic and cultural devastation they were suffering. A local writer, Nancy Paddock of Litchfield, wrote *Planting in the Dust*, a one-woman play about the farm crisis. The story was so resonant that LSP took it on the road and produced it more than four hundred times across the Midwest.

With these cultural interventions, LSP gave voice to a unique worldview – one that felt simultaneously old-fashioned and revolutionary. As they were called in to stop foreclosures in the 1980s, challenge factory hog farms in the 1990s, and prevent consolidation of the dairy industry in the 2000s, organizers found themselves telling a story at odds with what people were reading in Time magazine or seeing on the evening news. Four times a year, LSP broadcast this story in quarterly newsletters mailed to more than five thousand rural residents. Landing in rural mailboxes alongside glossy trade publications fat with advertisements for seeds and combine harvesters, LSP's unusual 32-page journal contains first-person accounts of farmers and the challenges they face, book reviews, updates on relevant national news, and a classified section where farmers seeking land can connect with farmers seeking tenants. "Narrative and storytelling are deep in our DNA," says Schultz. A paid ad that ran in rural weeklies across the state in 2004 exemplified this narrative approach. "Governor Pawlenty, do you share our values?" The words accompany a picture of Lois Nash, a rural Minnesotan and Republican, pictured on her farm.

LSP began working with Dave Mann at the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) in 2005, and he supported the organization as they thought strategically about how to change the public conversation. In 2011, Mann worked with staff in LSP's Farm Beginnings program to help them be intentional about the narratives they were using in their work. Two years later, at the invitation of LSP and nine other rural organizations from Oregon to Missouri, Mann helped nearly 200

rural leaders develop narratives about farming, rural communities, and the land. It was another deepening of LSP's work on narrative.

During this decade, it became clear that this thoughtful organization would benefit from a more deliberate approach to their communications. "Care of the land and the idea that the land is the source of life were embodied in LSP's initial value statements," said Mann. But these animating visions had begun to recede into the background, a common problem for organizations engaged in urgent struggles and short-term campaigns. "We were in fight after fight," said Schultz. "Factory farms, attacks on local democracy, subsidies for corporate consolidation of agriculture – and often narrative was assumed and not put front and center." At the same time,

LSP gave voice to a unique worldview – one that felt simultaneously old-fashioned and revolutionary.

the organization was under increasing pressure to conform to the growing dominance of corporate agriculture and its worldview. Funders and allies urged LSP to partner with companies like Cargill, muffle their critique of pesticides, and limit their enthusiasm for traditional practices like rotational grazing of livestock. So the organization's leadership made a commitment to reconnect LSP's staff and grassroots members with the powerful sources of inspiration that turned them into activists in the first place.



WHY UNDERTAKE NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Organizer Tom Nuessmeier on his hog farm

In 1999, Richard Healey, then director of the Grassroots Policy Project, began writing about “three faces of power,” a distinction derived from the British social theorist Stephen Lukes. The aim was to encourage community organizers and social change activists to think more broadly and more long-term about the kind of change they aspired to see in the world and the strategies for advancing it. While generations of organizers had focused on the first face of power – organizing people and resources for direct political involvement in visible decision-making arenas – Healey now drew their attention to two other faces. One was political infrastructure, including developing leaders, recruiting a grassroots base, and cultivating networks of organizations to advance long-term agendas of change. The other was making meaning on the terrain of ideology and worldview.

The third face [[wrote](#) Healey and Sandra Hinson] is about the power to shape people’s conscious and unconscious understandings of the world, of what is politically possible, and of their own place in the world. This kind of power operates in the arena of worldview, where myths, stereotypes and values from our cultures and histories converge, and sometimes diverge. Those who control meaning-making institutions have this kind of power: religious institutions, educational institutions, the media, television, mass consumer culture, popular ideas about government, major political parties, and so on. The ability to shape how people understand and think about race and identity, about family and gender, about the economy and the market, and about the government is a dimension of power that conservatives have harnessed much better than we have.

GPP encouraged organizers to enter into battle on this terrain, by using their time and resour-

es to change the way people conceptualize the world in which they act.

Working on narrative, as GPP understood it, goes beyond efforts at “messaging” and “framing.” The goal is bolder and more long-term. Through narrative strategy, activists aspire to transform the public conversation, gain control of the larger political narrative, and do battle on the terrain of meaning. If messaging is a reformist effort, tinkering around the edges with discussions in the public square, narrative work is explicitly revolutionary and transformative. If messaging is immediate and short-term, aiming to grab the day’s headlines, narrative work is subversive and long-term, aspiring to win the battle of public opinion over the course of years or decades.

Land Stewardship Project’s rural members faced significant challenges in the realm of ideology and worldview. Even as economic restructuring and agricultural consolidation were destroying a way of life that had existed for decades, a free-market worldview undermined the values rural residents held dear and then blamed them for their hardships. During the Reagan years, families lost farms, local jobs disappeared, real wages fell, and government support declined. As small towns withered, the reigning ideology suggested they were just collateral damage of economic progress. The ethos of individualism made it hard for people to mourn the loss of community in rural areas, let alone stand up and fight for it.

Farmers faced cultural and economic pressure to adapt to the new landscape of corporate

agriculture. Farmer Tom Nuessmeier, the fifth generation on his family farm, is a Land Stewardship Project organizer who started out as one of the organization’s rural members. He vividly remembers the threat vertical consolidation of the pork industry posed to his family’s 200-acre farm. Nuessmeier’s father ran what is called a farrow-to-finish operation: the farm managed all the phases of their animals’ lives: breeding, gestation, farrowing (giving birth to piglets), lactation, weaning, and growing the pigs to market weight. Changes in hog farming began in the 1970s with the rise of consolidated animal feeding operations, in which 2500 hogs or more would be fattened up in a single operation, a huge increase in scale over family farms. Changes in scale also led to specialization. In place of farrow-to-finish farms, farms now specialized in specific stages in the hogs’ life-cycle, with the pigs moving from one “confinement set-up” to another. The new factory farms are characterized by high-density animal populations, restricted movement, an emphasis on economies of scale, and toxic by-products like massive outdoor lagoons filled with liquified manure. Many pigs now live their entire lives indoors, never breathing fresh air or setting foot on soil, from birth to slaughter. Along the way, says Nuessmeier, “farmers changed from owners and decision-makers of an enterprise to managers of a barn and the animals inside, which are owned by a someone else, usually a large integrator.”

Nuessmeier recalls an agricultural lender encouraging his father to borrow money to build a massive hog confinement set-up. “Here’s a way for Tim and Tom to stay in the farming business,” the banker had said, implicitly warning Tom’s

father that his sons might be unable to stay on the family farm if he didn't adapt to the new business model. But the Nuessmeiers resisted the idea that "the animal on the farm is kind of like a widget or a paperclip that you churn out," believing instead that a pig was "something in and of itself, and is important and recognized as part of the farming operation. ... We all raise animals and send them to be killed; that's how we make our money. But within that, there's animal welfare, and how farmers make the decisions, and we didn't want to be just a link in a chain of raising protein products." When the family persisted with their traditional farming practices (successfully!), they were branded as "dinosaurs." On other farms, similar changes to commodity farming, vegetable farming, and later dairy farming were also accompanied by cultural messages that blamed farmers for their own failures in a market structured to drive them out of business.

Land Stewardship Project defended farmers like the Nuessmeiers, small-scale family farmers trying to compete in a corporate environment. They promoted agricultural practices that were sustainable and humane. They encouraged farmers to make the health of the soil a priority. They helped small organic farms sell produce through community-supported agriculture and farmers' markets. The organization supported families trying to hold onto the land they loved,

and simultaneously provided training and resources to young people who had chosen to become farmers at the same cultural moment that economic changes were driving thousands of farmers away from the agricultural life. In all these efforts, LSP's work ran up against not just the economic power of corporate agriculture, but also the cultural force of neoliberal ideology, which celebrated the free market (even as massive multinational corporations wrote the rules in their favor), trumpeted the use of technology and chemicals that made small farmers dependent on firms like Monsanto, blamed farmers for difficulties they encountered, and brushed off the devastation in rural communities as an inevitable by-product of progress. Faced with these challenges, it was inevitable that a central part of the organization's work would be the need to tell a different story.

The aim of this narrative work was bold. LSP didn't just want to shape the messages used in its public-facing work; they wanted to change the world. The ambitions of narrative strategy are profound: to alter the way we think and talk, to change the values we live by, to rewrite the rules. By changing the words we use and the framework by which we understand and act in the world, we can actually make room for tangible, material changes that make a real difference in people's everyday lives.



Photo by Kristine Leuze

DEVELOPING NEW NARRATIVES

Board member Laura Frerichs on her family farm

By the time LSP committed to work with GPP on the development of a coherent narrative strategy, Dave Mann had honed a process for helping communities unearth the core narratives that could propel their work. To make explicit the implicit values and principles that inspired the organization and its constituency, LSP hosted a series of gatherings for 47 leaders and six staff members. (A link to the agendas and handouts can be found in the appendices.)

The first set of conversations named the unfor-giving narratives LSP members were up against and surfaced the deep values the group shared. In the closing months of 2015, there were two gatherings to develop the first set of narrative ideas, each one including staff and grassroots members of the organization, drawn from across LSP's program areas. Participants received a

crash course on narrative: what it is, how it can limit or propel your work, and how you can inter-vene in the narratives of your community to make change. Leaders and staff worked together to name the elements of the dominant narrative they wanted to challenge, then brainstormed el-ements of a visionary new narrative. Dave Mann encouraged them to submit "more than a word, less than a sentence," and a designated scribe gathered the phrases that emerged – phrases that described the values they held dear and the world they wanted to see.

For the next step, a few staff and leaders from each gathering were given tiny strips of paper, each one holding a phrase that emerged from this exercise, and invited to sort them silently into themes. Farmer Laura Frerichs described the process:

We had hundreds of pieces of paper that we as a group had to organize, all without speaking. It was crazy. Everyone was free to move things around. It was a free-for-all! We had to work together non-verbally. That was a cool activity. ... No one could dominate the conversation. It was pretty egalitarian. That activity [required the group to be both] creative and cohesive.

Some of the clusters that emerged focused on care of the land, local democracy, and the value of rural communities.

Over the winter holidays, volunteers synthesized the output of these conversations into a one-page transformational narrative that highlighted the central ideas, values, themes, and statements that had emerged. In January, staff and leaders met in groups organized around their issue advocacy work: frac sand and land use in rural communities, healthcare, state farm policy, and federal farm policy. Each group discussed how the general themes could be tailored for

their specific campaigns – a process GPP calls narrative framing – and created a written document applying the transformational narrative to the unique issues of the four different teams.

The final convening was powerful. At a leadership gathering of more than forty people, participants in the earlier conversations shared the transformational narratives they had created. Some people choked up; others wept. “These are so beautiful, they’re like poetry,” says member Darwin Dyce. “If I was a better writer, I’d like to write a song out of it.” For all involved, it was a moving experience to hear articulated in plain English the deeply held beliefs that had brought them into the work. Then Land Stewardship’s hard-working members and staff rolled up their sleeves and made plans for applying this new framework to all their daily activities: selecting and waging campaigns, outreach to new members, training programs, newsletters, social media, and lobbying.

The ambitions of narrative strategy are profound: to alter the way we think and talk, to change the values we live by, to rewrite the rules.





RURAL LIFE AS A REPOSITORY FOR TRANSFORMATIVE NARRATIVES

The lengthy process was designed not to create new ideas but rather to unearth the powerful core values that already motivated LSP's members and staff. As they drafted and redrafted, synthesized and edited, they tapped into deep undercurrents of belief that swirled in their cultures of origin, the same forces that brought people like Tom, Johanna, Darwin and their colleagues to LSP in the first place. "These deeply rooted values weren't invented in the process of narrative development; they were lifted up," says Mann. The narratives that emerged from the process "embodied the wisdom of generations of Minnesota farmers and rural people."

Some communities find it easier than others to access resonant narratives of liberation. Dave Mann argues that farmers may have privileged access to these deep shared values. Because they are connected to the land, he argues,

"there's already an unstated set of shared values." Farmer Tom Nuessmeier proposed that the beliefs and values that emerged during the narrative development process were concepts he had learned growing up on a farm, particularly in the repeated moments of the annual cycle. For example, in the spring, his father would report where the ground-nesting killdeers had nested, so the family could avoid crushing their eggs with farm machinery.

What I learned from that approach to farming was there's a value here beyond the money you make from the crop. If there weren't, why make a welcoming space for the birds who come back to the farm? ... My parents weren't saying, "oh, the environment is important," but there was a bigger picture.

Farmer Laura Frerichs, who did not grow up in a farming family but decided to become a farmer

as a young adult, describes the deep values of stewardship she finds among some of the older farmers (though she hastens to say that these values are not universal):

People who have been farming for generations, some have a strong ethic of stewardship and conservation because they lived it, because they were born into it. It seems like [that value] was modeled and handed down through the generations. [Among] these farms and farmers, it is so deep. It's maybe less intellectual.

Mark Schultz echoes this sentiment:

The thing about people working on the land, especially if they're not in an air-conditioned cab with stock market reports flashing up at them, twenty feet above the ground, if they are small or moderate-sized [farmers] and doing all that plowing, seeding, moving cattle, they are in creation. They are surrounded not by the media that is the construct of a corporate controlled society. They are in the land, on the earth, seeing life. It has a powerful truth about it. If they have a connection to previous generations, that only strengthens it. But even without it, we are still creatures of the conditions that surround us.



These deeply rooted values weren't invented in the process of narrative development; they were lifted up. The narratives that emerged from the process embodied the wisdom of generations of Minnesota farmers and rural people.



NEW NARRATIVE TOOLS

At the end of the process, Land Stewardship Project emerged with three coherent narrative documents. (See Appendices.) The first sums up the dominant narrative that Minnesota farmers face, those words, values, and ideas that shape the cultural landscape and form a “common sense” that is often unwritten or unspoken. This dominant worldview reflects the no-nonsense logic of the market and the grim ethic of neoliberalism. It includes statements like these:

- Farming is a business, not a lifestyle. Farm operations and agribusinesses need to continue to develop modern agriculture that is efficient and competitive on a global scale.
- Agriculture’s main purpose is to produce abundant, safe, affordable food for the global market. To do this, agriculture must rely on chemical inputs and genetic engineering.
- Open, unfettered markets operate most efficiently. Environmental protections, labor

laws, health laws, and tariffs limit trade and keep farmers and corporations from being most profitable, while also increasing prices for consumers.

- Family farms are a thing of the past and are not profitable.
- Wealthy, successful people know best.

These tenets and others like them have been stunningly successful in remaking our social world over the last forty years. If there is anything surprising in reading them here, it is only that they seem too obvious to articulate. These are the unsentimental rules of our contemporary social universe, as much as gravity is a rule of the natural world. But unlike the laws of nature, which operate whether or not we believe in them, the act of naming these foundational principles begins to free us from their hold. We don't have to accept their logic. We recognize

these precepts were created by people for a particular political purpose, and we can do the same. By unmasking the unwritten rules of our social order, we make it possible to revise them.

Alongside this unrelenting narrative of corporate progress, Land Stewardship Project's members and organizers developed the narrative they wanted to see in the world. It isn't an answer to the dominant worldview, because the key to effective narrative strategy is to start from your own values, not get sucked into answering your opponents. Like the rules of economic progress and free trade, the aspirational narratives also tap into deep, unspoken assumptions. Narrative strategy offers community leaders, the public, and decisionmakers the possibility of endorsing convictions that are liberating, not oppressive. In so doing, we provide ways to think about the world that enable social change, instead of limiting it, that empower the little guys – farmers, rural residents, members of small towns – instead of the big guys – multinational seed companies, vast dairy farms, and shadowy global investors. LSP called this worldview their transformational narrative.

Here are some of the elements of the transformational narrative named in LSP's final document (included in its entirety as an appendix):

- Agriculture is dependent on the health of the land and is practiced within the ecosystems of the earth.
- The farm animals we raise, care for, and eat for our sustenance have value in themselves; they're valuable life, not mere commodities.
- The land is an incredibly diverse community of life.

- We must be stewards of our water and conserve and protect it.
- Rural communities and the health of the land require that many people own farmland.
- Advancing the public good requires public investment.
- Our public institutions must be transformed to work for the benefit of all Minnesotans and the earth.

Although these are general statements, both the dominant narrative and the transformational narrative documents were broken out by campaign areas. The frac sand mining group contextualized and applied the universal principles to write their own dominant and transformational narrative frames, and so did the federal farm policy team, the state farm policy team, and the leaders working on healthcare.

A year later, the narrative development process also generated a third document that brought the other two together in a masterful summary. Entitled "A Vision for Rural Minnesota," this two-page statement of values outlined LSP's core values and beliefs, named the challenges the group faced, and envisioned the community they aimed to build. The vision document lifts up democracy, community, interconnection, stewardship of the land, and environmental protection as values to cherish. Since it abstracts from the four campaign areas, it provides an organizational synthesis of the values and beliefs of LSP's members and staff. (It's a "premier document," says Kenza Hadj-Moussa, communications director of TakeAction Minnesota, an LSP ally, "which I often refer to when I'm looking for inspiration.")



MOVING THE NARRATIVE FORWARD

The process of developing a set of narratives is only the first and easiest step. The hard part is using those narratives, day in and day out, and incorporating them into daily words and activities. Carefully crafted sentences may look pretty on a piece of paper, but until they are embodied in an organization's activities, they can't change anything.

LSP had an unlikely advantage. Because they didn't have a large communications department, there was no place to ghettoize the narrative. Instead, staff and leaders throughout the organization began to use and apply the language that came out of the narrative development process. It was adopted throughout the organization, most rapidly by the campaigners in the Policy and Organizing program.

Even bright flames can die out, however, and some within LSP feared that the energy for narrative began to flicker almost as soon as the narrative development process concluded. Rather than letting it go out, LSP has devoted personnel to drive its narrative strategy. Johanna Rupprecht continues to steward the transformational vision (as one part of her job), and LSP recently brought on a new staff member to work with her and push a consistent narrative approach across the organization. Amanda

If anyone is planning something new or evaluating ongoing programs, we try to make sure the work is grounded in narrative.

Madison (whose official title is Base-Building and Communications Organizer) is charged with helping staff build the organization's grassroots base while advancing its transformative vision at the same time. She works across LSP's programs, looking at each one through the lenses of base-building and narrative, and trying to help weave narrative into the work. Today, she says, the organization is "trying to be more intentional. I make sure tools we develop are useful across all programs. If anyone is planning something new or evaluating ongoing programs, we try to make sure the work is grounded in narrative and base-building. So the faces of power support each other in their growth."

Maintaining a living connection between grassroots members and the organization's narrative documents is particularly critical and challenging. Madison says:

[LSP] didn't have someone fully dedicated to build an intentional program or ongoing work on narrative that incorporates member input, or a process that allows ongoing evaluation of the narrative we've built and what the dominant narrative is. We're figuring that out now. Members were really involved in the development of the narrative, but as we encourage them to be leaders, I'm wondering how we support them to be comfortable in using narrative as they testify, write letters to the editor, or use social media? They need tools and training.

The narratives generated in the meetings several years ago may be as central to LSP's mission as the constitution is to the United States, but if members know them only as some sort of historical document, they can't live up to their full potential.

LSP's experience with narrative demonstrates how evanescent this sort of work can be. It is challenging to sustain a focus on narrative over time and interrupt the process by which it becomes automatic. Just like any other activity, attention to narrative needs to be reinforced over and over, a task that requires time, energy, and personnel. To prevent the creep of routine from dousing narrative's spark, Land Stewardship Project has recently launched a new experiment in distributed or decentralized organizing. The "Sowers' Initiative" trains members to tell their stories by "planting seeds" in social media. Madison and Rupprecht are currently in the process of training interested members, and hope to have fifty signed up by the end of the year. Sowers will use their personal Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts to promote the organization's values and convictions in the public discussion. The idea isn't to parrot a party line, but to comment on daily events from the perspective of a farmer or rural resident, grounding each person's individual experience in LSP's narrative. Sowers will meet regularly with each other for support, and be accountable for tracking their posts and evaluating their influence on friends and followers. "We're not putting pressure on members to go viral," says Madison: we just want to encourage them to "do small things in daily life that can have an impact." This model makes grassroots members into narrative leaders and spokespeople, and keeps the values and ideas embodied in the narrative document alive in the public sphere.

In a world of multinational agribusiness companies, the presence of farmers and rural residents telling their stories, one at a time, is

surprisingly subversive. When we train new farmers or support sustainable farms, says Schultz, “we are building the new economy, and the new food and farming system.” When new farmers speak in public about their lives and their hopes, they are “talking about the

future, about what agriculture can be. ... Being able to support a farmer like Laura Frerichs to tell her story – that’s an important part of our narrative.” The voices of individual rural residents, intentionally deployed, have the power to change the public conversation.





Photo by Kristine Leuze

THE BENEFITS OF NARRATIVE STRATEGY

By all accounts, LSP has been extraordinarily successful at developing narratives and integrating narrative strategy into the organization's daily work. Staff, leaders, consultants, and partners sing the praises of LSP's narrative work. LSP "has been exemplary in using narrative across the organization," says TakeAction's Hadj-Moussa, a statewide leader in narrative strategy. "You see it from all angles; it's very deeply ingrained." Here are some of the ways narrative strategy has strengthened the organization's work.

Narrative strategy strengthens leadership

The most immediate benefit of the narrative process that LSP undertook in 2015-16 lay in the process itself: the leaders involved found the experience inspiring and empowering. "The process of creating the narrative was amazing," said Darwin Dyce, a grassroots leader who

lives in a rural, conservative part of Minnesota and is particularly active in campaigns around healthcare. "Everyone's input helped shape the dialogue." Farmer Laura Frerichs, who is also a member of LSP's board, agreed. "The process of developing narrative was powerful and inclusive. I loved the multiple levels of shaping it with different groups of people involved." She was particularly enthusiastic about the leadership role of grassroots members: "It was members who were in charge of organizing [the process] and coming up with those larger value categories. It's a big deal. A big vision. It was emblematic of LSP to have that [process] be member-led and member-organized."

Involving the grassroots leaders in naming the narratives positioned them to articulate those ideas after the formal process ended. Thanks to the work with GPP, says Schultz, "we now

have dozens of leaders who are not just aware of narrative as an arena of power to contend in, but able to contend in that arena on their own. Dozens of leaders and staff [are now] ... moving strategies in the field of narrative.” Hadj-Moussa observed “narrative work in action” when TakeAction and LSP participated in a joint press conference around healthcare in the Spring of 2019. “It was powerful to see how seamlessly their members and staff were able to talk about individual experiences of struggling to afford healthcare, and tying that to an overall vision about the kind of healthcare we deserve, based in dignity and not profits.” She was very impressed with the ability of LSP’s members to connect their own stories to a pointed analysis of corporate influence in healthcare and the deeper values that Minnesotans share.

Darwin Dyce now regularly uses the narrative as a resource when he writes letters to the editor. He uses it on lobbying visits when he talks to elected officials about healthcare and other issues. He draws on it when he participates in local LSP membership meetings. The clear written narrative, he says, helps him overcome a tendency to censor himself in public speech, to tone down his emotion and play it safe. “The new narrative we came up with is so beautiful and reflective of the awe we feel towards Mother Earth, and I wonder if maybe sometimes people don’t speak that way because they feel like they won’t be heard, or would be put in a box. But I think we’re at a point where who cares what box we’re put in? These things need to be said! People need to speak from the heart, and ... that’s how transformation will happen.” Laura Frerichs also draws on the narrative documents frequent-

ly. She has used them to formulate questions for candidate forums, and to talk to people outside LSP about the organization’s values. “As someone who is now a board member and needs to think strategically about the future of the organization, it’s a great foundation for contributing to how I’m thinking about issues. ... The document itself has been helpful for me as a leader to have something solid that I can go back to. Something I can direct people to.”

People need to speak from the heart. That’s how transformation will happen.

Narrative promotes organizational unity

LSP’s intentional work on narrative has produced a greater sense of unity across the organization, for a shared statement of purpose now connects people in different programs: Farm Beginnings, which provides hands-on mentoring and technical assistance to new farmers, many of them young people; Soil Health, which brings farmers together to develop agricultural solutions to economic and ecological challenges, many of them older farmers; and Policy and Organizing, which organizes people to fight factory farms, frac sand mining, and unchecked corporate control. The narrative connects members who came to the organization for different reasons, such as farmers who have farmed for decades, like Tom Nuessmeier, and younger newcomers,

like Laura Frerichs. “If I met a five-generation farmer,” says Frerichs, “I might not think we had anything in common, but the narrative is a unifying document.” In coming years, says LSP’s communications organizer Amanda Madison, this narrative may be key to attracting new audiences who aren’t yet members. “What is the new strategy to engage a new and different base?” she muses. “I’m thinking about ... how we can bring more young people into LSP. We will need a more broad age group in our base. There’s a lot you can do digitally with design and style to catch young people, but narrative is a huge part of that.”

Narrative strategy helps avoid partisan divisions

Although some people might generalize that Minnesota farmers are elderly, white and conservative, LSP has a diverse membership base. The organization’s members and followers cross lines of age, gender, race, geography, and partisan identity. LSP’s emphasis on core values (predating their work with GPP but “deepened and sharpened” by Dave Mann’s interventions, says Mark Schultz) has made it easier for them to connect with supporters who might be doubtful about some of LSP’s positions. When the organization talks about values, they can appeal to a bipartisan audience: “stewardship is conservative,” says Schultz; “conservation is conservative; concern about excessive corporate power is conservative.” In 2018, the organization’s sister organization, the Land Stewardship Action Fund (LSAF), endorsed Keith Ellison, an African-American Muslim and former leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, for attorney general. It was the solid narrative foundation

of the organization that made this a non-event, because LSAF defended and explained their endorsement based on the values the organization was committed to, including opposition to corporate power. The narrative they developed, says Schultz, helped build a “bridge between progressive issues and rural members.”

Narrative strengthens work on racial justice

In a similar way, the newly developed narrative supports LSP in its work on racial justice. Racial equity has always been a core value, but the narrative foundation makes organizers more confident about how racial justice fits with the overall mission. Today, when organizers do events in rural town halls or host workshops about protecting the health of the soil (the program that draws from the widest political spectrum of farmers), they talk openly about racial justice, with little or no blowback.

With a solid narrative foundation, the organization has emerged as a racial justice leader in rural parts of the state. In Pine Island, LSP members joined the local community to stop an immigrant detention center. They carried out focused racial justice work with several native communities, including the Ojibwe in Red Lake and the Dakota in Upper Sioux. In April 2019, when LSP held a meeting in the town of Mankato, staff and leaders translated its name from the Dakota language as “Blue Earth” and recalled its dark history: Mankato had been the site of the largest mass execution in US history, in 1862, when Abraham Lincoln ordered 38 Dakota leaders hanged. Recently, LSP’s board changed its policy on accepting gifts of land

to prioritize restoring land to tribal entities, and today is in conversation with members of the Upper Sioux Tribal Council about returning land to them. Connection to the land – a founding value for the organization, now formally enshrined in narrative – has widened the space for this kind of dialogue.

Narrative strengthens coalition work

LSP's narrative work has drawn admiration from partners in Minnesota. Staff at other organizations are effusive in praising LSP's narrative strategy and its benefits for the wider movement. Thanks to their grounding in a clearly stated worldview, says TakeAction's Hadj-Moussa, LSP's staff and members are enormous assets in coalition work. "Being deeply rooted in values has also meant that LSP can be a powerful messenger on [a wide range of] issues... Whenever we are in a fight, there's usually a natural entry point for LSP because of their clear narrative and worldview." She described a press conference where people of color, small business owners and farmers drawn from the grassroots memberships of different Minnesota organizations all spoke about why they needed affordable healthcare. "They were seemingly disparate members, but they all had the same grounding narrative." Since 2014, many of LSP's urban partners have united around a strategy for building statewide power, a strategy that relies on organizing in the rural communities and small towns of Greater Minnesota. Dave Mann, who works with many Minnesota organizations, observes LSP's critical role in this work. Because of their leadership role in narrative, he argues, the organization has had a huge impact on how rural people perceive statewide politics.

While LSP members may have had different concerns than those of their urban counterparts, "the underlying values were the same. This gave credence to the idea that the much discussed urban-rural divide is at least in part manufactured for political purposes." Powerful narrative work has thus helped heal some of Minnesota's geographic polarization.

Narrative strategy changes the public conversation

Among the benefits of Land Stewardship Project's work on narrative, probably the most significant has been the concrete benefit it has brought to advocacy campaigns. Effective narrative work transforms the terrain and helps win campaigns. The story of the Winona County ban on frac sand mining is the most dramatic example, but it isn't the only one. LSP has used its transformational narrative to help the organization talk strategically about healthcare, drivers' licenses for immigrants, sexual harassment, and other issues. They have used the narrative in campaigns to stop factory farms moving into rural townships. Since its founding, LSP has stopped 37 factory farms through local organizing, three in just the last nine months – suggesting the power that emphasis on core values and beliefs can have.

At a broader level, LSP's clarity about narrative has helped prompt a change in the cultural landscape. Madison offers up this big picture vision of what the rural narrative can accomplish. "It's the key not just to keep rural America from disappearing, but also to keep these values." Mark Schultz argues that the organization has changed how people think

and talk about agriculture in Minnesota. While people generally like the idea of family farms on an emotional level, they may feel their attachment is largely nostalgic, and don't believe it's possible to fight corporate agriculture. But in recent years the conversation has begun to change, and the work has gotten easier. "The starting point has moved," says Schultz. "Now when a factory farm is proposed for their community, more people say it doesn't have to happen. It's not inevitable. We can do something about it." He recalls:

When we started Farm Beginnings eighteen years ago, there was stiff resistance from some family farm groups They said, "there's no way

a small farmer can make it. You can't change the whole structure of agriculture! You're just fooling people!" But then people saw, "no, there actually are many ways that new farmers can get started successfully." There's a whole new wave of family farms.

This change came about "not just because we told a different story, but we've also been part of building a different story that is visible and edible." As a result of LSP's efforts to change the public conversation, both before and after their work with GPP, says Schultz, "we are more powerful. We are in a better place now than fifteen years ago. More people believe there's a powerful future."





CONCLUSION

Taking intentional steps to transform the public conversation can let loose a cascade of benefits. For the Land Stewardship Project, this work has helped empower grassroots members, unify the organization, collaborate with movement allies, avoid partisan rancor, promote racial justice and win advocacy campaigns. And yet it is more than the sum of these individual benefits. “The danger is if you see narrative as only a way to win a campaign,” warns executive director Mark Schultz. “It does, for sure, but it’s its own thing, too. Are we shifting people’s world views? Is a different story being told? Narrative is its own realm of power.”

Victories in this realm of power may be hard won and difficult to measure. And yet it is by winning the battle for public opinion that the

modern environmental movement, which Aldo Leopold helped catalyze, has transformed the political terrain and made possible policies to protect endangered species and precious ecosystems. It is by winning the battle for public opinion that the labor movement secured minimum wage, overtime pay, health and safety laws, and weekends. And it is by winning in this same arena that the staff, farmers, and rural residents connected with Land Stewardship Project have begun to make it possible for family farmers to protect their soil and farm sustainably, for rural Minnesotans to demand racial and gender equity, and for rural communities to thrive in an era of increasing corporate power. This work engages people as decision-makers, strengthens democracy, and widens the space of what is possible.

About Judith Barish

Judith Barish has written for and about Minnesota's social justice organizations for over twelve years. She lives in California.

About Land Stewardship Project

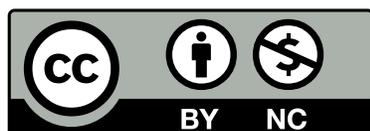
To learn more about Land Stewardship Project, you can visit their website at <https://landstewardshipproject.org/>, where you can also sign up to receive their quarterly newsletter.

About 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: <https://grassrootspolicy.org/>.

About 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 Narrative Initiative, please visit <https://narrativeinitiative.org/>.



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Appendix 1. Guide to Documents used in Narrative Development

Process

You can use [this](#) to access a folder of the detailed agendas and handouts used in LSP's narrative development process during 2015 and 2016. The folder contains the following items, which can be downloaded and modified for your use:

LSP narrative development overview: Initial proposal for the process including goals, sessions, and timeline.

Outline for training staff facilitators for round 1: Agenda used to train staff who then led the first round of sessions. The training included both a modeling of the session they were going to lead and a chance to debrief each section.

Outline for training staff facilitators for round 2: Agenda used to train staff who then led the second round of sessions. The training including both a modeling of the session they were going to lead and a chance to debrief each section.

Round 1 narrative development facilitator guide: Detailed agenda and facilitator notes for the first session of the process.

Round 2 narrative development facilitator guide: Detailed agenda and facilitator notes for the second session of the process.

Round 3 agenda – leadership assembly: Overview of the final step in the process, a leadership assembly.

Synthesis session guide: Description of process used to synthesize the brainstorming from round 1 into the transformational narrative.

Handouts used in LSP process: Folder that contains all the handouts used during the narrative development process.

Appendix 2. Some Elements of the Dominant Narrative We Face

Our value as humans is only economic. Our success is judged by our contributions in our work, how much we buy and how much wealth we accumulate. Financial measurements should guide all decisions.

Our land, water and natural resources are vital commodities to be used (and used up) to produce food, energy and profit.

American farming is and must feed the world. Farmers are business owners. It is essential for government to provide a safety net for farmers when disaster strikes.

Family (and sustainable) farming is a thing of the past and they should be. It is not worth the sacrifice and not profitable. This is why people no longer want to run small farms.

Bigger and fewer farms and corporate production systems are better because they produce more food in the most efficient manner possible.

Rural people need more sophisticated and knowledgeable ‘experts’ to guide them. They need to be told what to do and how to think. At the same time, **rural people, regardless of income, are choosing the life they want and don’t need the same support as people in urban areas**

Individuals and companies making choices in a free market economy is the most efficient way to meet current and future needs.

The U.S. is a post-racial society. Systemic forms of racism have been eliminated. To the extent that racism exists it is only coming from bad-acting individuals.

Those with wealth (capital) should be allowed to control wealth and determine where it is invested. Power should be concentrated in their hands because they are the experts – they know best.

Corporations are people. We need and benefit from them. They have rights that must be protected.

The role of Government should be restricted. It should defend our borders and dominance, protect property and those who own it, and ensure corporations have the freedom to operate and grow without restrictions.

Government is separate from us. Our role as citizens is to vote and then allow those we elect to do what is best for us. Voting is how we should exercise our power.

Appendix 3. A Transformational Narrative for LSP Policy & Organizing: A Work in Progress

The planet is a whole and is sacred. It sustains all life. The earth commands reverence.

The land is inherently valuable. The soil, water, air, animals and all non-human creatures have worth independent of their impact on humans or economic value.

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.

The earth is abundant. It provides more than enough land, water, air, nutrients, animals and other natural resources to meet our needs if we share the resources equitably. The resources provided to us by the earth are both finite and renewing. Continued abundance relies on good stewardship.

All people have inherent value and dignity. Our worth comes simply from being, independent of economic measures. As in nature, diversity is necessary and valuable. Difference contributes to resiliency.

People must live in relationship—we rely on each other and the earth for life. Communities help us to live in right relationship with each other and the earth. In community, we balance our individual needs with the needs of the group. It is our purpose and responsibility to treat each other and the earth with respect. We live in gratitude and joy.

The economy exists in concert with nature for the purpose of serving all people, no exceptions. The economy is a human project—it does not exist independently of our wants, needs and common purpose. It helps us equitably distribute resources among ourselves. All businesses, including corporations, exist only so far as they are needed to serve and support people and the land.

All people have the right to meaningful work. Care for the land, care for children and care for the elderly are all essential work and command respect. Though work has non-economic value, it must pay enough, and fairly, so that all people have what they need to live well.

Farmers are stewards of the land. The responsibility and joy of caring for the land is shared by many farmers, families and workers. Farmers and people who work to get food from the farm to the table earn a sustainable living, and healthy food is affordable and accessible to all people.

Government and public institutions belong to the people. Public institutions provide infrastructure and public policy through which we can do together what we can't do on our own. Government exists to serve people. When our communities or economy fail to treat all people with respect and share resources fairly, our government has a role in restoring economic and racial justice.

In our democracy, it is up to us to make our public institutions best serve people and the land. People have power when we work together. As engaged citizens, we bring our power to bear in many ways—not merely as consumers or voters, but as organized people who work collectively to reform and transform our government and our economy.

In our work together, we respect and rely on diverse ways of knowing and acting. While we are grounded in our own traditions, stories and past, we also learn from the traditions, stories and experience of others. We are both firmly rooted and searching.

The needs of the future shape our decision making. Our history and our traditions ground us in the present and can guide us to care for the earth, each other and our institutions in consideration of the legacy we leave for the next generation.

Appendix 4. A Vision for Rural Minnesota

Values we share



LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

We are rural Minnesotans. We love our communities and take pride in them, and we are stewards of the land and world around us. We also acknowledge the challenges we face, in our communities and across the state. We do not see our interests or struggles as separate from those of other Minnesotans, but connected by shared values and shared goals. We are hopeful and committed to building a strong future, working together within our communities and with people across the state.

When we think about the future we want, we start with our core values and beliefs:

- Every person has value that can't be earned or taken away. Similarly, there is inherent value in the land, water, and natural world that gives us life.
- Being part of a community brings meaning and richness to our lives.
- We depend on each other and on the world around us to survive and thrive.
- We are stronger when no one is left behind and everyone has opportunity to contribute fully. We all have something to offer.
- We care for each other, and we prioritize protecting and improving our surroundings, to leave things better for our children and grandchildren.

Challenges we face

When we look around the countryside, we see things we know are not right, and that do not fit with the future we want for ourselves and the generations to come. We know that our concerns are connected to those of people in all parts of the state, and we know we need to work together to solve them.

It is hard for us to look around our rural communities and see things that go against our values:

- We see the land and soil being degraded, rivers and lakes polluted, drinking water depleted, and extreme rains, temperatures and droughts becoming “normal.”
- Huge companies controlling seeds and chemicals, buying grain and processing livestock are making large profits, while paying farmers less. This is making it harder for farmers to both succeed and take care of the land.
- High land prices drive more consolidation and block new farmers from changing the landscape.
- People in our communities are left out and left behind. We have seen before that times of economic uncertainty can fuel division, anti-immigrant sentiment, and racist acts and policies, and we see these threats again.
- Our local businesses struggle or close, while large corporations that are not invested in our communities take over, or abandon us if there is not enough profit to be made.
- Health insurance premiums and deductibles are unaffordable, while hospitals are closed and services cut in our communities.
- Young people are told that opportunity is somewhere else.

The communities we envision

It is clear that change is needed so that rural people and communities, and all of Minnesota, can succeed.

This is the rural Minnesota we are committed to building:

Vibrant communities that are a place of belonging and opportunity for everyone. We love living in small towns and rural areas. It should not be a sacrifice, or be viewed as one. Long-term and new residents, people of different races and from different backgrounds, young and old all have a place in our communities. Building a strong future will take all of us working together.

A countryside where the soil, water, air, and natural world are healthy. We are close to the land in rural communities, and caretakers of the world around us that nourishes us all. The soil and landscape, lakes and streams, plants and wildlife, and a stable climate all are critical, both because they sustain life and because they deserve respect on their own. Building soil and farming sustainably are part of tackling major challenges we face, including climate change. We must protect and improve the world around us for the future, not abuse and exploit it.

Strong local economies where all can succeed. We depend on each other, and we're invested in each other's success. Rural communities are stronger with more farmers making a living on the land, and with successful local businesses that are committed to the community. We need opportunities for meaningful work with pay that allows families to flourish, along with quality housing, services and infrastructure that connect us and allow for innovation. We envision stronger connection with people who live, work, and eat in urban and suburban communities to build a shared prosperity together.

A farming system that cares for farmers and the land and makes healthy food available to everyone. Minnesota is an agricultural state, where raising livestock and crops shapes the economy and our daily lives. Our health is connected to the health of the soil, the wellbeing of the land and the way we grow food. We need it to be possible for more farmers to access land, and for farmers to be able to succeed economically while caring for and healing the land. We must prioritize small and moderate-sized farms and invest in local and regional food systems in which healthy food is accessible for all people.

A high-quality healthcare system that takes care of everyone and frees us to pursue meaningful lives. Having the security of knowing that we can easily receive needed medical care when we are sick or hurt, and that we can afford it financially, would create new freedom for all of us. Removing worries about healthcare allows people to start new businesses, engage more deeply in our communities, and pursue happiness. We need health insurance coverage that is comprehensive, lifelong and available regardless of a person's work. This coverage must be available at a cost that each family can truly afford. We need quality medical care to be available close to home and when we need it.

Communities that grow our future by valuing families and children. Our current actions shape what is possible for our children and grandchildren. We want rural communities where young people can see and build a future and where families want to move. Families and children need excellent care and support throughout their lives, in our communities. This includes prenatal care, parental support, childcare, quality schools, and activities for families. We need strong public schools that provide opportunity for all of our kids, and access to higher education.

Where people have a say and shape our own future. We want engaged and active communities shaped by a diversity of voices. We need community leaders and elected representatives who take guidance from us, and who act courageously in the best interests of the people they serve. We are committed to building the communities and state we want to live in.