

**2.0**

*The* **STORYTELLERS'**  
**GUIDE**  
*to* **CHANGING**  
*our* **WORLD**

**CULTURE SURGE**

Culture Surge is a women of color-led coalition of storytellers, artists, organizers and researchers working together in this vital moment for the survival of our communities, our democracy, and our shared future.

[www.culturesurge.com](http://www.culturesurge.com)

Dear Storytellers,

Working together, artists and organizers across the country have co-created inspiring, civically activating stories, sharing a vision of our future where human happiness, connection and belonging are paramount.

In 2020, artists, storytellers, and culture-makers were active partners with field organizers in creating a culture surge. Their collective power and artistry inspired unprecedented voter turnout by communities and individuals who have resisted and survived subordination and discrimination throughout the post-1492 history of our land.

Elections aren't the whole answer, of course. Voters favoring choice arguably won the election, but that didn't stop the Supreme Court from setting back women's rights by 50 years. Meanwhile, as the US Congress remains mostly paralyzed and out of step, systemic racism, unchecked climate catastrophe, unbridled corporate power, and under-treated global pandemics continue to disrupt and take lives every day—always wreaking the worst damage on our communities.

We want to activate our communities and allies again through the undeniable force of **cultural organizing**. We are calling on artists and organizers to join together to direct your insight, energy, and imagination toward voting, civic engagement, constructive protest, culture change, and a deepened sense of our power to co-create a future where everyone belongs and thrives and justice prevails.

We must inspire ever more people to take action in the streets, in schools, on the job, at ballot boxes, at community meetings and in public hearings. We need to inspire action with emotional stories that lift up joy, stir souls, touch hearts, and open imaginations to change minds and change the future. It is the transformational power of storytelling and culture-building that can motivate people to act now.

This is an update of our very successful first edition of The Storytellers' Guide, which appeared in 2020 and was widely influential. This second edition is augmented by a focus on the collaboration of artists and organizers to secure long-term culture change. There's also a new, practical "**field companion**" to help organizers and artists work together to create, produce, and distribute stories.

Think of these side-by-side guides as a highly simplified chart of possible pathways that will get us to an anthology of liberation and love.

We're excited to be traveling these pathways with you, supporting the diversity of your individual efforts and producing this anthology together.

Yours in solidarity,

*Culture Surge*

This short guide will help you make your own storytelling as effective as possible by building on a core story that's been tested and proven in many social justice projects. This guide describes Culture Surge's work, summarizes the experience and research that informed the core story, and illuminates how and why stories create cultural, social, and political change. We also invite you to use it to help:

## **Build Your Skills & Find Resources**

Find more resources, meet collaborators, and stay up to date. **Sign up now.**

Get your questions answered and learn more in our briefing series. **Sign up now.**

Get practical storytelling advice from our network of experienced practitioners who will make specific suggestions and introductions to assist you—like helping to find people with the skills you need to create, produce and distribute your story. **Get Advice.**

## **Share Your Stories & Ideas**

Share your stories inspired by this guide on social media with the hashtag #culturesurge so we can connect and spread them further with our amazing distribution network **Share your stories & art.**

Share this guide with other storytellers by spreading this link on social media, small pieces of paper ripped off pads or paper napkins, and so on: **Share the Storytellers' Guide 2.0.**

# A Core Story to Connect Thousands of Wildly Different Stories

When this Guide first appeared, our goal was to turn out more of us to vote than had ever voted before. We needed thousands of diverse, transformational stories to activate millions of people, and we knew from experience and research that each story’s power to move people to action would come from two crucial threads:

**Imagining vividly the world we want to win—  
a world where everyone is free and everyone  
belongs; and**

**Understanding that such a world is possible  
if we, the people, organize and act together  
to demand it.**

When we say “stories,” we mean a creation with a beginning, middle and end that follows believable characters on a consequential journey in which things change. In the case of impact storytelling, the most effective tales take us on **“a journey from where we are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work.”**

Any story’s power to change the world depends on the immeasurable quality of artistry. Powerful storytelling connects with audiences by evoking strong emotion. We relied on extensive research which shows that great stories work best to produce positive social change. (Major studies that informed our work are listed below in **How Stories Create Change.**)

**But storytelling requires more than science to succeed.  
It requires art.**

We believe organizers need to work with storytellers who share their values and goals to use their individual creative instincts and lived experiences to produce a huge range of stories. Our core story is designed to do this, identifying the deep inner feelings and yearnings that are shared by the vast majority of the people we need to engage, reach, persuade and activate. This coherent emotional core helps artists fashion very different stories that feel connected and are most likely to advance a particular social or political outcome. When hundreds or thousands of creators unleash individual stories that are connected at the core, the cumulative impact has the power to reach millions and tilt the whole culture toward equity and justice.

Deep, enduring, mostly unconscious emotional yearnings are what shape human decision-making and behavior, **science says.** These deep needs don’t change often, if ever. Here’s one form of that core story. We believe it will remain enduringly effective for years to come:

**WE, the people,  
have the power.  
Acting together,  
caring about each other,  
WE will imagine and create  
the world we want and need—  
Joyful, protected, and safe,  
Where we each belong,  
Where we all can thrive.**

## What’s a “Core Story?”

In this Guide, the term “core story” means a broad, generalized plotline or throughline that connects a group of stories. The best example is the core story “Love is love,” which connects the millions of individual stories that together transformed our culture’s view of marriage. “Love is love” is also called a “narrative” by many.

The word “narrative” isn’t found in this Guide (except in this sidebar, of course, and in the titles of a lot of reports and studies we cite) because it means different things to different people, especially people who do different kinds of creative work or social research. In the entertainment business, for example, “narrative cinema” just means a movie that tells a story. In the field of storytelling for social change—the field called “impact storytelling” or “narrative strategy”—a recent report defined narrative as “patterns of stories that are held by individuals or groups and contain beliefs about the way the world works.” This says a narrative is a pattern, not a story.

In everyday speech, most use “narrative” and “story” interchangeably. For impact storytellers and narrative strategists, the word “narrative” is subject to debate. On the whole, the debate shouldn’t matter to organizers and artists, for whom this Guide is written. But it can get confusing, which is why we didn’t use the word. To avoid confusion, our advice is to ignore the debates and use words that work for you and your audiences.

# Exploring the Core Story & Its Threads

The seven story threads, on the following pages, are what we call **rich storytelling areas**—areas of life where we can find an abundance of stories expressing different aspects of our one core story. Exploring them can unearth an infinite trove of individual stories and subplots that fit with and reinforce the core story. You can probably see some of these threads within the stories you already are telling and consuming.

The rich storytelling areas that speak to you may be rooted in a cause or community or in the internal revelations that come to each of us. They can be about lived or imagined experiences, about how things could or will be, how victories have been won and more will follow.

These stories can and should be told and spread in all forms—film and video, paintings, posters, poetry, murals, songs, symphonies, dance, sidewalk graffiti, photographs, books, magazine stories, pamphlets, social posts, ads, letters to the editor, deep canvassing conversations, campaign speeches, and on and on. Fiction and nonfiction. Short and long. In many languages.

We're only saying what's clear to any creative person: There are many, many ways to tell a story of personal agency and a better world. A uniform tagline or hashtag is a great help in spreading a good story or collection of stories. But insisting that everyone use a particular word, phrase, or message frame in all stories does not necessarily make those stories more effective, especially when addressing different audiences with different values. There's no silver bullet in world-changing. Rather, we need diverse storytellers to create wildly diverse stories that share a common vision and a common emotional core. Then the potential for change and impact is maximized.

The purpose of these rich storytelling areas is to give artists specific places in everyday life to search for tales that project or embody the core story. Also, different areas may connect more strongly with different audiences who hold different values. Importantly, there's nothing rigid about rich storytelling areas and stories. Any given story may combine any number of these areas. And you may find stories that fit into entirely new categories and have little to do with any of the story threads listed here. Please let us know what you find out there: Your stories and the rich storytelling areas where you found them.

# Storytelling for Different Audiences

Groups of people with differing primary values and worldviews tend to like stories that intersect with their beliefs about how the world works. The sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom wrote a good [New York Times piece](#) about this eternally true phenomenon, saying:

“We divide ourselves into Fox people versus CNN people, country music versus hip-hop people and reality TV versus prestige drama people. The lines are not fixed—there is always crossover—but they are rooted in something fundamental: identity. Our imagined Americas are as divided as our news cycles.”

**Harmony Labs**, a progressive media research group, has been massively tracking and quantifying America's media-watching behavior to “decode” the social values that attract different audiences to different kinds of news and entertainment. Based on their research across many media—TV, social media, YouTube, movies, music, and so on—Harmony finds that America divides into four groups with cute, descriptive names and distinct primary values. Persuading people about virtually any public issue, Harmony says, requires knowing what group they belong to and telling them stories in ways that intersect with their group's main values.

We refer to and link to their research in several places in this Guide. Helpfully, Harmony's in-depth research can tell you who belongs to each group, where they live and work, what their political beliefs tend to be, and more. It's rich data, but complicated. One quick useful takeaway from Harmony's chief data scientist, Riki Conrey, reveals a simple way to view the central path to the hearts and minds of each group.

A good introduction is Harmony's **“4 Values-Distinct Audiences,”** found in their online Narrative Observatory. Here's a quick overview:



# Rich Storytelling Areas

CULTURE **SURGE**

## **LIBERATION**

Stories of  
Bodily Liberation  
& Freedom

## **ABUNDANCE**

Stories that  
Show There's  
More than Enough  
for Everyone

## **CARING**

Stories of People  
Leading the Way  
& Caring About  
Each Other

## **JOY**

Stories of Joy  
& Healing

## **BELONGING**

Stories of Our  
Common Desire for  
a Better World

## **WE**

Stories of Individual  
& Collective Power

### EXAMPLES OF THESE RICH STORYTELLING AREAS

In a continuing effort to provide useful resources to artists and organizers who are working to change the world for the better, we've committed to maintaining an online library of examples that will be continually updated. Each example probably uses more than one rich storytelling area; some actually contain all the values and concepts embodied in all the story threads. Look through a random sample of these stories and think about who they speak to and why they were made.

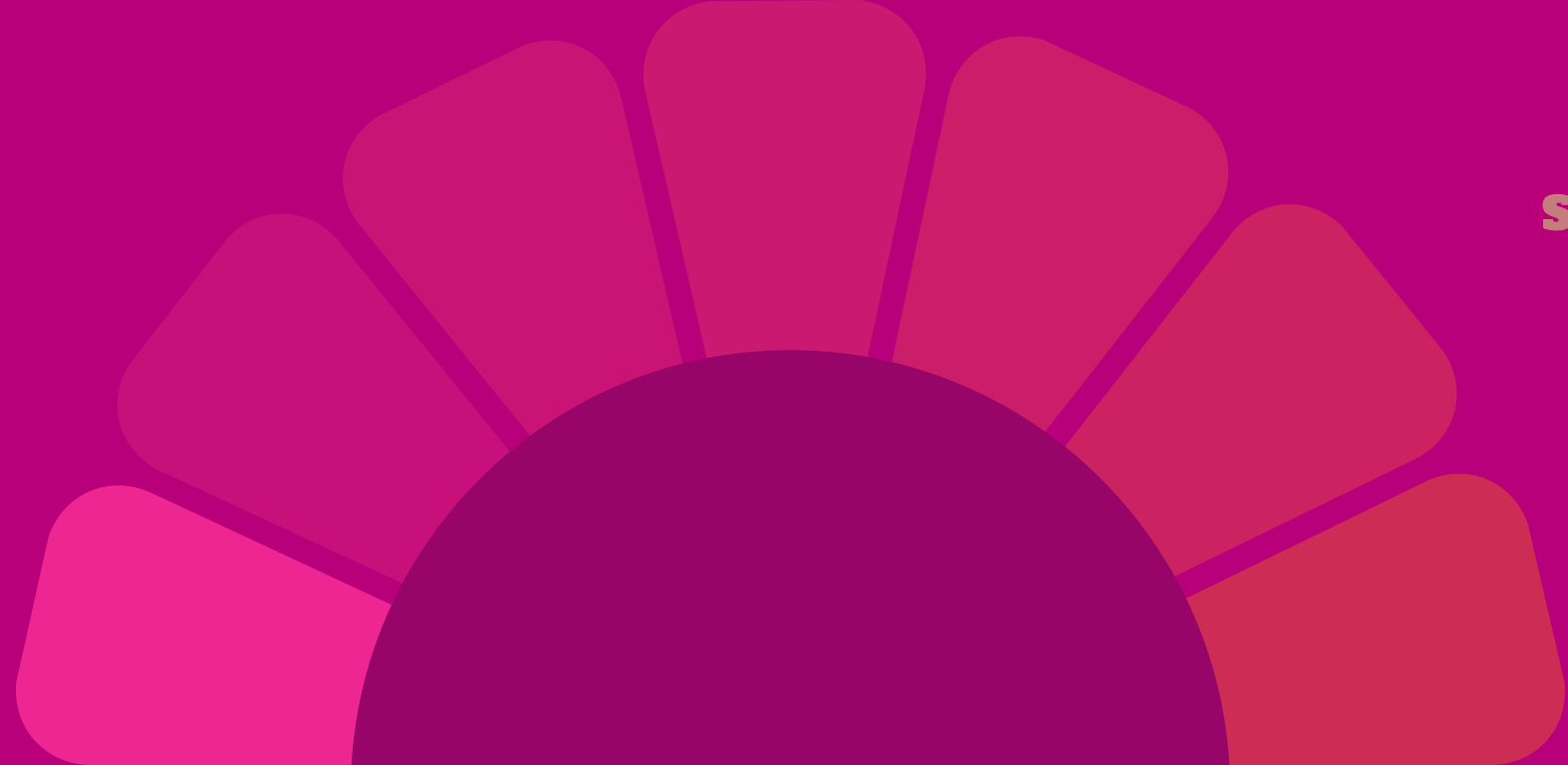
## **CURIOSITY**

Stories of  
Curiosity &  
the Future

# WE

**stories of  
individual &  
collective power**

**Rich  
Storytelling  
Areas**



Each person has power and there are many kinds of power. Some have the power to be chosen and to lead. Some have the power to join with energy and new ideas. Some have the power to work alone. Collectively, the power of people to make change is unlimited. People may get together in a neighborhood group, a community of faith, a national organization, a leaderless collective, or any other expression of social, political or spiritual union. People may create art, stories, and ideas alone. When people realize their power and work toward the same goal, they can beat any force on Earth. The stories of these victories over the powerful can be found across the country and the world.

# **BELONGING**

**stories of our  
common desire for  
a better world**

Stories of the human desire for belonging. Stories of allies and connections that defy barriers. Sharing how we aspire to shift government and its systems to unite us and do for each other what none can do on our own—ensuring equal treatment and opportunity; protecting us all from physical and economic harm; sustaining us and our planet. These are stories of making our country a home where human differences are seen, equally valued, and celebrated; where everyone is safe and sustained. In these stories, we can enlarge on a story-driven shift in culture that has transformed the notion of “hero” from a straight, white male operating solo—like Superman or Batman—to a team of less-super, more-everyday heroes, like the Avengers or, in real life, the frontline workers, Black Lives Matter, or the US Women’s National Soccer team, which famously won the World Cup in 2019 and scored a huge victory for equal pay in 2022.

# LIBERATION

**Rich  
Storytelling  
Areas**

**stories of  
bodily liberation  
& freedom**

Stories of our bodies in all shapes and forms receiving and giving love, respect, care, and welcomed desire. Visual stories that picture the varieties of our shapes and colors, the varieties of our physical love. Stories that replace the false idea of “ideal” bodies with stories that uplift each of us for being unique and precious. Stories that show how body autonomy extends to all aspects of our personal being; how physical self-determination creates safety and how safety is essential to freedom. Stories that underline how physical the world and existence really are; how we show up in the universe as physical presences with physical needs. Stories that show how individual consent must govern physical affection, touch, personal space, sensuousness and sexuality. Stories that lift up the right of individuals to a realm of personal sovereignty over their own body and define this as a right that is inviolate unless there is compelling evidence of harm to others. This includes stories about the human right to healthcare, to be healthy, and to live the longest, healthiest life they want; the human right to be pregnant or not and to have an abortion or not; the right of two people to love and marry or not; the right to define their body’s gender as they wish; and any other right necessary to exist physically and free.



# ABUNDANCE

**stories that show  
there's more than  
enough for everyone**

We can have the resources and talent to create and sustain good lives for all. Truly representative government would provide world-class healthcare for all, excellent neighborhood schools, preeminent and free colleges, good housing, advanced skills training, beautiful parks, first-class public transportation, needed clean-energy infrastructure, and so much more. We can showcase the value of sharing resources with one another in many ways: Tiny community gardens produce fresh vegetables for dozens of families. Neighborhoods practice mutual aid. Unions, worker co-ops, and other employee-owned businesses send profits to workers and allow us to control our work lives. Scarcity is both an illusion created to divide us and keep us down, and an argument designed to keep us from questioning existing priorities that put people's needs last. Finally, we need stories that redefine our relationship to the world, to all living things, and to all resources; stories that would redefine what we mean by words like “abundance” and enough.”

# CARING

**stories of the people  
leading the way and  
caring about each other**

**Rich  
Storytelling  
Areas**

The best people to decide how change should be made in a community are the people of that community. Gerrymandered legislatures are not “local control.” We, the people, are the best leaders for our neighborhoods; our towns, villages and cities; our states; and our country. We care—about ourselves, our kids, grandkids, elders, and neighbors. We know more about what we need. Changing the culture is what changes politics. The best political leaders understand this and pay close attention to what we call culture and others may call “the public mood.” This is how the civil rights laws were passed, women won the vote, same-sex marriage became a reality, police violence started to be addressed, and so much more. There are many, many stories of the people leading the way at all levels of civic engagement.

The forces we fight against are grim and the damage these forces have done throughout history is almost too much to comprehend or bear. Yet, we feel the path to victory is one of joy and healing. There is joy in working together for the good of all, even in our hardest moments and through our toughest challenges. Our work is about helping people to make happier, healthier and better lives for themselves, their families, friends, and neighbors and, ultimately, for everyone. Our goal is to heal the world; to find, wherever possible, how restoration and reparation can be accomplished. Our stories should show the joys of life are unlimited: the joy of belonging, expressing your own identity, creating your own art, cooking a good meal, making a family, making something yourself for your home, being independent, depending on a community for help, and on and on.

# CURIOSITY

## stories of curiosity & the future

Rich  
Storytelling  
Areas

Stories narrating how child-like wonder and curiosity about each other, our society, and the universe is the portal to understanding and unity. Research shows that making people curious is a precursor to growth, change, and engagement. This thread includes stories that question the fundamental assumptions in the systems that control us. Stories that celebrate seeking an understanding of generations, cultures and beliefs. Stories inspired by Afro and Indigenous futurism. More stories: Of people crossing cultural and racial lines to find out about each other and forge bonds; people asking fundamental questions, like “What kind of world do we want our children to grow up in?” and “What will make our communities really safe for everyone?” and “Why can’t the world’s richest country create opportunities for everyone?” and “Aren’t there new rules for our economy that would share our riches fairly with workers and owners?” And so on... As James Baldwin wrote, “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.”

## How Stories Create Change

Culture Surge’s work is informed by a synthesis of successful large-scale, multi-disciplinary research projects around stories that have led to massive societal change. The diverse work on which this Guide is based shares remarkably similar and mutually reinforcing results.

Projects that informed the basis of the Culture Surge core story (pre-2020) are listed here along with newer projects that have added to the knowledge base and experience of impact storytelling to change the world:

**A Future For All Of Us: The Butterfly Lab For Immigrant Narrative Strategy** (2022)—Phase 1 of Race Forward’s multi-year project produced an **ambitious final report** that lays out a six-part “narrative system” to advance the long-term movement to make America a place that welcomes migrants, immigrants and refugees without reservation.

**A World Free of Nuclear Weapons** (2021)—Because the terrible, world-ending potential of nuclear war had virtually disappeared from public conversation decades ago, **this project of the Nuclear Threat Initiative** focused on finding a narrative to re-activate the American people’s once-strong support for nuclear disarmament. The narrative researchers’ central hypothesis was that a person’s active opposition to nuclear weapons would hinge on believing in the possibility of a better future—a future that would never come if nuclear war were allowed to happen. In an important finding for all impact storytelling, the research showed that most Americans harbor grave doubts about humanity’s future and that inspiring action for virtually any social justice cause requires that we tell a vivid, credible story about the promise of the future.

**Story at Scale** (2020)—A year-long, national collaboration of researchers, data scientists, artists, advocates, and organizers to develop and test a new cultural strategy to advance gender justice. This work was backed by the Culture Change Fund, a consortium of national and regional foundations housed at the Women’s Foundation of California. The project produced a **“story platform”** and a new understanding of audiences in America based on their differing feelings around gender.

**Becoming America** (2020)—A narrative project of The Pop Culture Collaborative, which they describe as “a grantmaking initiative that invests in pop culture for social change content and leadership that can build deep yearning among a true majority of Americans to co-create a pluralist nation where everyone belongs, inherently, and is treated as such.” Founded by a network of philanthropic leaders—primarily women of color—led by Unbound Philanthropy, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the Ford Foundation.

**Midwest Culture Lab** (2018)—An experiment to increase and deepen civic engagement among youth, particularly youth of color, by integrating cultural organizing and story-driven content strategy with grassroots, youth-led organizing.

We also drew valuable lessons from many other projects, reports, impact stories in all media, and written reflections, some of which are included in these selected further readings:

**Losing Forward: Lessons from Organizing for Narrative Change**, Nonprofit Quarterly (2022)

**Narrative Strategy: The Basics**, Liz Manne Strategy (2022)

**Spotlight on Impact Storytelling**, Liz Manne Strategy (2022)

**Dispatches from Data Science: Selling the Ending**, Harmony Labs report on the importance of a positive future story as discovered in the project **A World Free of Nuclear Weapons** (2021)

**Becoming America** (2020)

**Center for Cultural Power Covid-19 Narrative Guide** (2020)

**Marketing Malpractice** by James Forr, Olson Zaltman (2020)

**How To Stop Mismeasuring the People** by Kirk Cheyfitz, Political Narrative (2020)

**Pillars Fund’s Muslim Narrative Change Cohort** (2020)

**Story at Scale** (2020)

**Our Story** (2019), Demos

**Midwest Culture Lab, Alliance for Youth Organizing** (2018)

Abstract of **“The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments.”**

By Joshua Kalla & David E. Broockman (2018). *American Political Science Review*, 112(1), 148-166. doi:10.1017/S0003055417000363

**How to Talk About Government** PDF, FrameWorks (2006)



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## About This Guide

This Guide was co-written in 2020 and updated in 2022 by Erin Potts and Kirk Cheyfitz, two pioneers of culture-change work who were commissioned by Culture Surge to synthesize and briefly (emphasis on “briefly”) summarize the experience and accumulated practical knowledge of the growing field of impact storytelling. The intended audience of the 2020 edition was artists of all kinds—both the art-for-art’s-sake kind and the commercial artists working in media (recognizing that many artists are both kinds), as well as pop-culture mass entertainers and community-focused influencers. All artists remain an under-resourced asset of progressive movements. This new edition adds the audience of field organizers for progressive causes and politics, recognizing that we need coordinated, emotionally moving storytelling from many voices over long periods of time to produce lasting change. This means our long-term success requires mutual understanding and close collaboration between organizers and artists.

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