

Harnessing the Power of Storytelling and Storylistening: Fostering Challenging Conversations in Coastal Communities

by Holly Parker

As sustainability practitioners we often spend our time in vibrant echo chambers. We're invigorated by debates about how to support just and sustainable communities and environments. But what happens outside that echo chamber? What happens when we meet "the other"—a neighbor, a colleague, or a decision-maker who doesn't share our urgency for action? Do we go it alone as we seek to make change? Or do we need to build new, unexpected partnerships?

In a time when technology and political and social divisiveness make it easy to dismiss "the other," it is vital that we build pathways to understanding opposing points of view and better communicating our own. Western data and scientific language are persuasive to some audiences. But for others, they carry less power. Storytelling and storylistening are vital tools for breaking down perceived barriers to collaboration and cooperation. Sustainability practitioners should challenge ourselves to approach those with opposing views with empathy. Storylistening, which includes asking questions that elicit lived experiences, creates understanding of how a point of view has developed through loss and gain, through fears and hopes. We can begin understanding the person beyond the position. We can further build trust by storytelling, sharing our own experiences, and we may create the opportunity to find common ground where it may have seemed impossible.

I had spent the better part of the day in back-to-back-to-back meetings. I was working hard in my first few months in a new role. I was eager to impress. When I finally got a break around 2 P.M., I realized I had forgotten my lunch. The only option was the local general store, which I knew would be blissfully quiet after the lunch rush. I hopped in my car and made the 5-minute drive.

Hungry verging on hangry, I walked in to find the cook scraping down the grill and two older gentlemen enjoying cups of coffee and fiercely discussing the latest waterfront news. I ordered a grilled cheese and bacon, grabbed a bag of Lay's and a water, and sunk into a chair—trying to make myself invisible. From across the room floated snippets of their conversation.

"goddamn NOAA"

"college-educated people... environmentalists"

"They got no idea what they're talking about"

"Sandwich's ready!" I skulked up to the counter and returned to my seat, settling in for what I anticipated would be a quick bite and exit. It is my job to reach out to my community and have challenging conversations about sustainability and the crucial issues facing our working waterfront communities, but I wasn't up to engaging. These salty guys were enjoying their echo chamber, and I didn't have the energy.

As I munched, I heard. "Hey, look over there. There's an attractive young woman eating a sandwich." I am not kidding. I was called out. I sighed.

"Hello."

"Who are you?"

"I am one of those college-educated people you were just talking about," I smiled.

He blinked. And burst out laughing. The ice broken, he asked me where I worked, what I did. And then he went for the zinger, "So what do you think about the right whale?"

"Well, I am certainly for protecting them, but I think the latest set of regs you guys are being hit with aren't based on good science."

Blink.

Maybe it was the grilled cheese or the challenge, but reenergized, I picked up the red plastic basket with my sandwich and chips and moved to the table next to them. So began one of the best conversations I have had in a long time.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a language used by practitioners, educators, industry leaders, and decision-makers around the world. Yet here in the United States and Maine, their influence and role are relatively minimal. While some institutions and businesses are actively using the framework to set priorities, implement strategies, and evaluate impact, the SDGs are new to many. The framework began as a tool with which to address global hunger and poverty in the late 20th century. The framework that was unanimously ratified by the UN 15 years later recognized the interconnectivity of human, economic, and environmental resiliency and thriving. Seventeen goals ranging from "No Hunger" to "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure" to "Climate Action"

include 169 targets for action. My favorite goal, and the one that drives my work as a sustainability practitioner and educator, is Goal 17—Partnerships for the Goals.

Impactful partnerships are relational rather than transactional. Partnership isn't about what I can do for you or vice versa, but rather partnership is about recognizing and trusting in shared values and goals to get us through challenges. In our own sustainability echo chambers, those partnerships come more easily. In our rural, coastal communities, those echo chambers often aren't enough to support local action. Political divisions run deep. Many in these communities feel left behind, that recent demographic and economic changes are disenfranchising them in the spaces and places they have lived in for generations. Yet the power of a few voices remains incredibly strong in small population centers. So rather than ignoring or trying to outmaneuver the other, perhaps we need a new approach to building unexpected partnerships.

I love data. While quantitative stats gave me graduate school nightmares, I am grateful that my training allows me to understand how data can shed light on not only the problems we face but can also indicate where solutions might lie. But data alone, particularly data derived from research and work disconnected from the communities in which one is trying to make an impact, is limited in its ability to build partnerships for action. In the work model I suggest, qualitative data, personal experiences, is at the root for all partnerships and subsequent action.

Ironically, data also shows that storytelling should play a prominent role in our adult world. Vanessa Boris of Harvard Business School writes, "storytelling forges connections among people, and between people and ideas. Stories convey the culture, history, and values that unite people. When it comes to our countries,

our communities, and our families, we understand intuitively that the stories we hold in common are an important part of the ties that bind."¹

Empathy. Ties that bind. Culture, history and values that unite people. These powerful concepts can bring home the urgency and intimacy of the sustainability and resiliency challenges we are facing. It is important to note that Indigenous knowledge systems, which are sacred to their people, must play a role in our work in rural, coastal communities. While that topic and its complexity demands its own separate commentary, building trust with Indigenous knowledge keepers and communities also demands that we start with relationship building, which includes acknowledging the painful legacy of the region's colonial history and committing to better understanding and addressing its lasting impact. But here, too, stories, shared and heard, held with empathy, are vital tools for building trust.

University of Berkley researcher Paul Zak writes that storytelling is particularly powerful for social creatures like humans because it allows us to rapidly form relationships with a wider set of members of our species than any other animal does. "The ability to quickly form relationships allows humans to engage in the kinds of large-scale cooperation that builds massive bridges and sends humans into space. By knowing someone's story—where they came from, what they do, and who you might know in common—relationships with strangers are formed."² It stands to reason that storytelling is even more vital in times of great divisiveness and challenge.

Stories told in our coastal communities hold the key to accurately defining the problems we need to solve.

Unfortunately, western science and academia have a track record of landing in a place with a problem already defined and research and solution in hand. This approach simply does not fly in small rural communities. It is patronizing and often a galvanizing rallying point for those who oppose the proposed solution. But what if researchers and practitioners humbly entered communities with the storytelling and storylistening skills that could invite the community to define its own challenges?

Since ancient times, sailors have used the sea serpent to embody the unknown. It lies below the surface ready to rise from the depths when least expected. It is anxiety and fear personified. In my first year as director of the Schiller Coastal Studies Center, in Harpswell, Maine, I have used the painting "The Lobster Trap" to spark conversations for this very reason. Fear and anxiety are two of the most powerful drivers of human action. I ask community members to define their sea serpent. Answers are wide ranging and reflect what experiences inform them.

"I fear my children won't be able to make a living."

"I fear the impacts of climate change on my children and grandchildren."

"I fear I will lose my home."

"I fear losing a way of life."

"I fear not being able to feed my family."

When hearing these fears, it is important that I simply validate them. It is NOT my job to assuage them and certainly not to disabuse community members of them. Fears are deeply felt and personal. Sharing one's fears is brave. Hearing another's fears is a responsibility. When both happen, trust can begin.

It is vital to remember that in welcoming and enabling challenging



The Lobster Trap

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conversations that the goal is hearing the person, not the position; it is to build trust rather than change minds. Storytelling and storylistening require a specific set of qualities and skills. It is a give and take.

Empathy is at the root of storylistening success. Back to the sea serpent. A shared fear can be hard to hold with empathy, particularly if it represents an understanding of the world that directly opposes my own. This difficulty is not unusual in sustainability work where issues of equity, diversity, economic and political conflict, and justice often rise to the surface. My instinct may be to invalidate that fear, challenge it. But at this stage of building trust, it is important to

focus on the emotion itself to reset my sense of empathy. It is hard work.

Patience is also vital. Stories are told at the storyteller's pace. Sometimes I need to ask questions to dig more deeply into the story of an anxiety or fear. What has the storyteller experienced or observed that has informed that fear or anxiety? I am not suggesting that sustainability practitioners become counselors or therapists, but having the patience and persistence to ask simple questions such as "can you tell me more about that?" can reveal important quantitative data.

Curiosity can't be faked. You need to want to know the person. And they need to feel that. No one wants to feel like the subject of a study. They want to feel like

you are really interested in them. Ironically, one way of doing that is sharing your own stories once theirs are told. It is important to remember, that telling your story is a tool for building trust, not agreement. Be as honest with your fears and anxieties as they are with theirs. Wait until their story is told to their satisfaction before sharing yours. That will demonstrate that you are listening rather than formulating your next counterpoint.

Trust is the foundation on which the challenges we face in our coastal communities will be defined and solutions will be successfully built. Quantitative data has the undeniable power to help us see both problems and solutions, but it is qualitative data that can help build the unexpected partnerships we need to meet shared goals. Relying on our echo chambers is not enough in rural communities where a few voices can carry great power, either in support of or opposition to a proposed path towards resiliency. As sustainability practitioners we need to take on the difficult responsibility of engaging in conversations that push past position to see and hear the person. In the end storytelling and storylistening, are vital and powerful tools, to creating change that will support sustainable coastal communities, environments and economies.

Back to the general store. An hour quickly passed, our conversation ranging from right whale conservation to floating wind power to sea level rise. We did not agree on everything; in fact, we agreed on very little. At times I became frustrated, my academic brain fighting to lean on data in the face of their opposition. In those moments, I reminded myself to ask questions that elicited the stories behind the positions.

"What were your best days on the water?"

"What was it like growing up here?"

“What changes have you seen?”

Even simply, “Can you tell me more?”

I heard their anxieties about losing a way of life, not just an income. I heard about long days on the water, the exhaustion at the end of the day, and the determination to head out at first light the next morning because this was how they knew best to make a living. I listened to their frustration at what they perceive as disrespect shown to an industry that has been at the core of Maine’s blue and tourism economies. I began to see and understand their sea serpents. In turn, they heard my stories of working in boatyards and on the waterfront and witnessing the industry’s efforts to reduce the number of vertical lines in the water and to add break-away clips to their gear. That I still admire the ingenuity of the simple act of V-notching egg-producing lobsters. They also heard my fear that unless all Mainers embrace our history of innovation and adaptation, the Maine I know and love will disappear, that working-waterfront communities will become only playgrounds for those who can afford them.

I stood up and put on my coat and returned the red plastic basket to the counter.

“Look, I gotta head back to work. It’s been great talking with you guys.”

Both rose and shook my hand. As I walked out the door, one called out,

“You can come back!”

NOTES

- 1 Boris, Vanessa. 2017. “What Makes Storytelling So Effective for Learning.” *Leading the Way*. <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/>
- 2 Zak, P. 2013. “How Stories Change the Brain.” *Greater Good Magazine*, December 17, 2013. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_stories_change_brain

Holly Parker is the director of Bowdoin College’s Schiller Coastal Studies Center. Parker supports thriving communities, environments, and economies through place-based education and research programs. To address coastal Maine’s challenges, she brings together students and researchers from across the disciplines, community members with generations of local knowledge, policymakers to craft effective solutions and business leaders to help evolve the blue economy.