

STORY OF SELF

adapted by the work of Marshall Ganz

Stories not only teach us how to act – they inspire us to act. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we feel – our hopes, our cares, our obligations – not simply what we know that can inspire us with the courage to act.

As leaders, our ability to communicate our own stories—the experiences and histories that have shaped us and the values and motivation that drive our work and goals—is an essential skill that helps us connect with others, build our credibility, and inspire people to action. These stories are critical to have in our own toolkits. A good public story is drawn from the series of choice points that have structured the “plot ” of your life—the challenges you faced, choices you made, and outcomes you experienced.

Your Task

Step One: Reflect on your story

Take time to reflect on your own story. Grab a notebook, a recorder, or a friend who will listen, and describe the milestones and experiences that have brought you to this very moment and that elucidate the values and experiences that lead to our movement. Also, we’re not looking for stories that are slick and polished. The story you tell does not have to directly relate to civic involvement (we’ll get there in a bit, small bites), it should communicate who you are—your values, your experiences, and why you do what you do. “When we tell stories of self, we aim to bring out the ‘glow’ from within, rather than... apply a ‘gloss’ from without.”

In your own life, focus on **challenges** you had to face, the **choices** you made about how to deal with them, and the satisfactions—or frustrations—you experienced. What you learned from the **outcomes** and how you feel about them today.

- What do they teach you about yourself, about what you value, what motivates you, your strengths, and your areas for growth?
- What do they teach you about your family, about your peers, about your community, about your nation, about the world around you, about people—about what really matters to you?
- What about these stories is so intriguing? Which elements offer real perspective into your own life?

If you’re having trouble, the exercises prior and questions that follow can get you started. These questions are *not* meant to be answered individually. They are intended to help to inspire you and get your memory gears rolling so that you can reflect on your public story and tell it with brevity and intentionality. Don’t expect to include the answers to all these questions each time you tell your story. They are the building blocks of many potential stories, and the

object right now is to lay them out in a row and see what inspires you.

- What memories do you have as a child that link to the people, places, events that you value? What are your favorite memories? What images, sounds or smells in particular come up for you when you recall these memories?
- Some of the moments you recall may be painful as well as hopeful. You may have felt excluded, put down or powerless, as well as courageous, recognized, and inspired. Be sure to attend to the moments of “challenge” as well as to the moments of “hope”—and to learn to be able to articulate these moments in ways that can enable others who understand who you are. It is the combination of “criticality” and “hopefulness” that creates the energy for change.
- When was the last time you spent a day doing what you love doing? What in particular made you want to use that day in that way? What was memorable about the day? Is there a specific sign, sound or smell that you think of when you recall this day?
- What factors in your life led you to pursue a passion for advocacy, civic engagement, and social justice?

Step Two: Prepare your Story of Self

Get clear on what you want others to take away from your story: the story you tell might allow insight into one of the following:

- Your values
- What brought you to where you are today
- What they can expect from you, and what they can learn from you
- What brought you to be involved with your community and consequently, VAPLP
- What you're interested in doing long(er) term and how this connects
- Something else?

Construct your plot: After you've reflected broadly, consider an element of your story that would take 5-7 minutes of sharing with others to illuminate something about yourself. Bear in mind a **challenge** you faced, a **choice** you've made, an **outcome** you've experienced, and the **lesson** of your story.

Make sure you get specific. Stories are specific—they evoke a particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, texture, taste. The more you can communicate this specifically, the more power your story will have to engage others.

Prepare to share your story: Consider how your story clearly connects what you want your audience (your fellow pod members) to learn about you and your values. Add details where necessary to build context for your audience. Remember that this is just one 5-7 minute piece of your greater story—it is intended to help us get to know you a bit deeper, but it is not the only story you will tell. ;)

STORY OF SELF WORKSPACE