

Decoding a Generative Story



Michelle Strutzenberger takes a moment to reconnect on the bank of Peterborough's Otonabee River. Of course, not all of the work can happen in such a harmonious setting. Photo: Yvonne Hollandy

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From getting in state to illuminating new possibilities

Monday, August 10, 2015 -- Michelle Strutzenberger

After more than 12 years of aspiring to practice what we've come to call Generative Journalism, several elements have begun to take shape as integral to some of the best experiences of the work.

These elements are not necessarily present in every experience. But the more of them that are, the more satisfying and more true to the vision of what Generative Journalism can be.

Just to clarify, this article focuses on the art of discovering and crafting a generative story. Obviously, there is a broader ecology — including community dialogues, distribution, circulation, editorial direction and so forth – swirling around that activity. Some of these elements are also relevant within that larger field, but it is beyond the scope of this article to explore how.

Presence/Connection

“Getting in state,” being fully present, connecting at a soul level. When an encounter between a journalist and a “source” is more than an exchange of head knowledge, the possibilities for the experience to be generative, that is, to yield new ideas, the promise of future partnerships and/or simply an energizing experience open up.

I personally find the more I “get in state” for the actual work of crafting a story, the more alive it tends to become.

Following the energy of a conversation or story seems to yield the most generative experience — an experience and artifact that touches more than the mind.

Deep breathing, taking a few moments to intentionally clear and focus my mind, stretching, dabbling in some inspirational reading, are all small practices I've collected over the years to help in becoming present.

Following

In both conversation and writing, there's an element of "following" that I've come to see as an important part of the work. Following is simply being open to what emerges — following what comes up. It's avoiding identifying the full story in advance, but truly coming in with a spirit of curiosity and discovery. Taking this approach makes the work much more adventuresome and exciting in the moment. It also comes from a spirit of truly wanting to hear someone's story and honouring that, rather than seeing how their story meets my agenda.

Energy Points

Even in choosing to follow, though, one has choices to make about what to follow. Do I follow the most vague elements of the story, to ensure I have all the facts correct? Do I follow that which ties in most to broader trends? While both of those foci have some place, it is following the energy of a conversation or story that seems to yield the most generative experience — an experience and artifact that touches more than the mind.

Sensing/Intuiting

Discovering the guiding energy in a conversation/story is essentially a skill in intuiting or sensing. It could be described as having something to do with gut instinct, though, ideally the gut instinct is operating from a focused, enlightened, appreciative stance. (Because it is possible to get that instinct wrong, that is, to feel and respond to an energy that actually yields negative or embarrassing outcomes. The more present and “in state” one is, though, the smaller the likelihood of mistakes. I’ve found that when I’m distracted, half in another world, that my sensing abilities get skewed.)

Gifts and Commitments

In sensing the guiding energy of a story, it helps to invite people to reflect on the gifts and commitments they and others bring to a work. This moves the energy in an appreciative direction that usually creates the safe space for people to share from their heart.

Contextualizing/Connecting

Perhaps the bravest part of the work of a generative journalist is seeing and then naming new possibilities that have been discovered.

It also helps to be aware of the broader context in which a story rests. No story is an island, no matter how innovative an effort. And, in fact, the more connected a person and story is to others, typically, the more alive the effort. As a generative journalist, the more one is tuned into broader patterns and energies at work in the world (especially those that also hold the seeds of a preferred future), the easier it becomes to hone in on the essence of a particular story, to draw out its particularities and the singular contribution it has to make in the world.

Essence

If the energy of a story touches on the emotions, then the essence might be said to touch on the soul what one is attempting to discover. Discovering the essence is largely an intuitive experience too. It's also possible to not quite get this. But the more present and appreciative and aware one is, usually, the stronger the likelihood one will find something that, even if it's not quite full on target, generates new possibilities.

Speaking of the Future as Though it Were Already True

Perhaps the bravest part of the work of a generative journalist is seeing and then naming new possibilities that have been discovered through surfacing the energy and essence of individual stories. This is where we've often found it helps to work as a team and talk through what's coming up in individual stories and how that manifests a larger possibility for the world.

Illuminating

The work of illumination can happen through a conversation, as one is present and connected, sensing and imagining. It manifests most obviously in the story. The story is in fact the illumination or the light, if you will, that can make more visible what may have been behind a kind of mist. The story presents to the world another way to see and hopefully, in doing so, creates new pathways to hope, joy and peace.

All the above said, however, I think most of us who've been part of this work agree that Generative Journalism leans in the direction of being more of an art than a science, and an evolving art at that. The above is not a formula to apply but elements to "flirt with," to see how much they create the conditions for new possibilities in our own experiences.

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