Transformative Narratives

Memes, stories and their role in transformations

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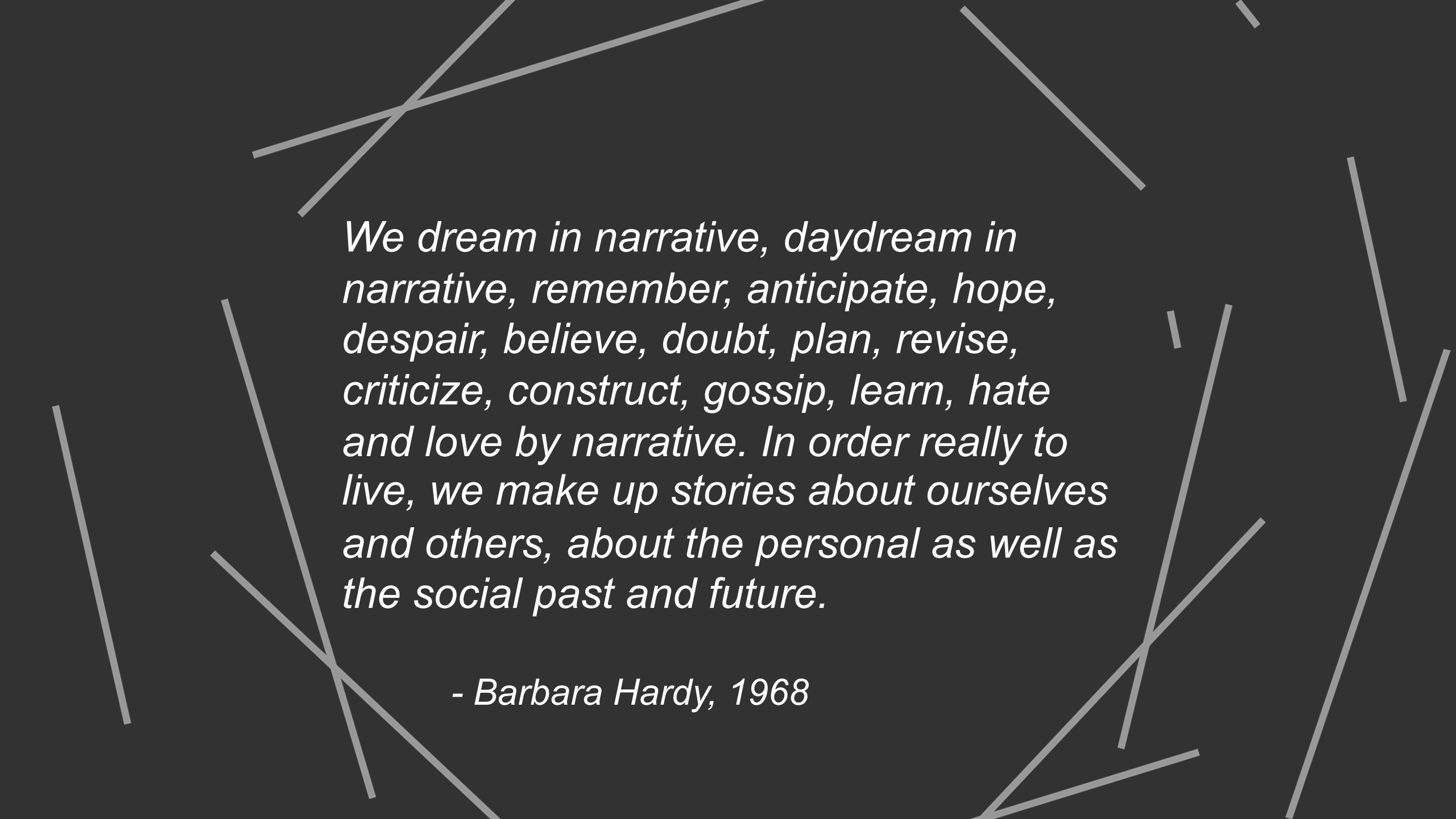# Program

Time	Session
10.00am – 10.20am	1. Welcome and introductions
10.20am – 11.20am	2. Core concepts and frameworks
11.20am – 12.30pm	3. Building common narratives
Lunch	
1.30pm – 2.00pm	3. Building common narratives (continued)
2.00pm – 2.20pm	4. Ethical storytelling practice in a transforming world
2.20pm – 4.50pm	5. Transformative storytelling practice
4.50pm – 5pm	6. The story continues

Core concepts

We are all born storytellers. Stories are how we make sense of a complex world.
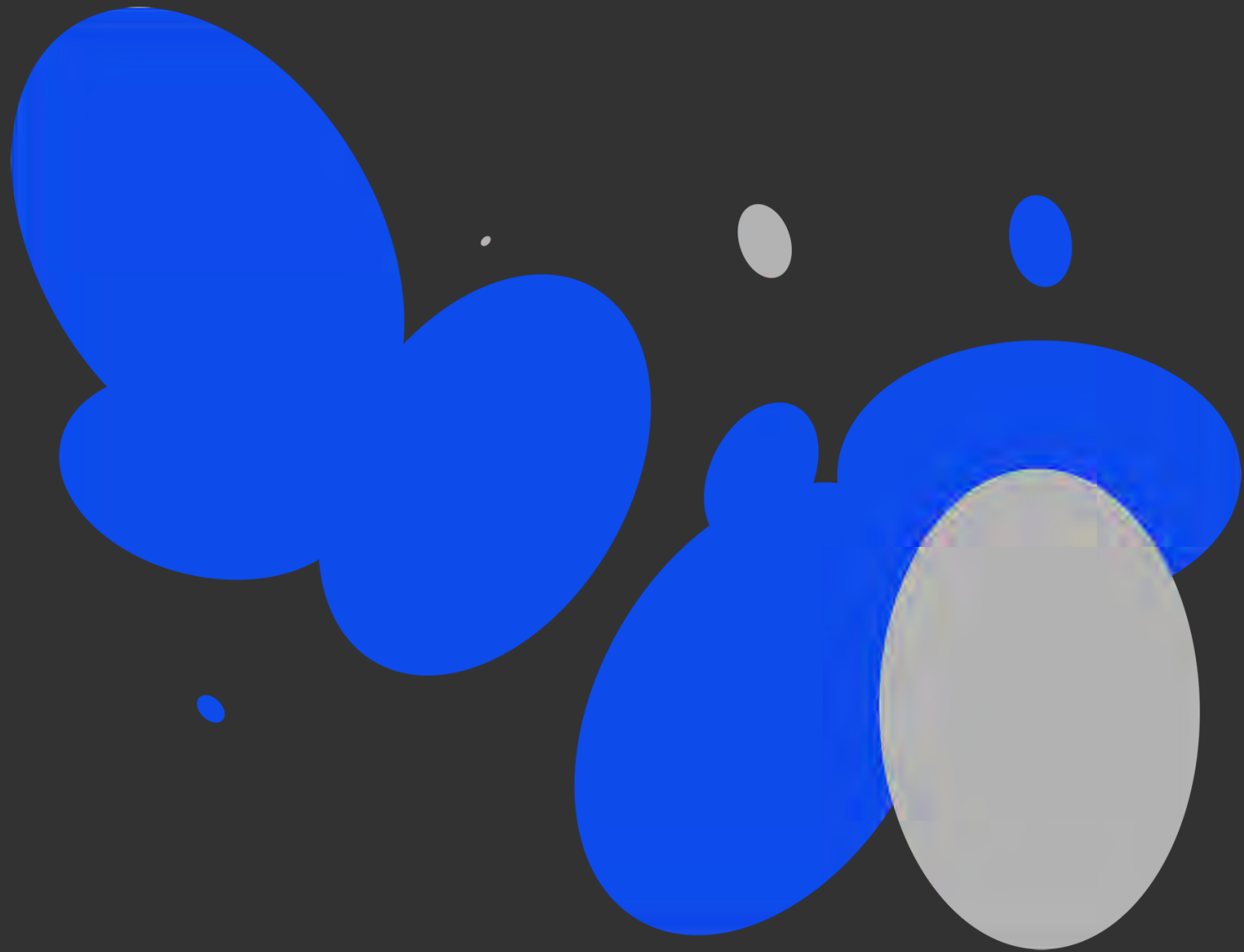
We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

- Barbara Hardy, 1968

Story and the brain

- In evolutionary history, storytelling emerged as a way to make wisdom 'stick' (Damasio 2012)

- 'We are creatures of an imaginative realm' (Gottschall, 2012)

- We are *Homo narrans* – the human being that tells stories – Kurt Ranke

Humans are pattern-seeking storytelling animals. We cannot endure an absence of meaning... We have a hard-wired need for myth. Narrative is basic to what it means to be human.

— Brad Allenby & Joel Garreau

The duality of story

- Stories can liberate or constrain us
- They can inspire and stimulate, or diminish our sense of what is possible
- They can be imposed on us, or generated by us
- They can promote the interests of the few, or the many
- They can transform, or they can resist change
- They can open up possibilities, or close them down

Stories can be used to…

- Make sense of, and learn from, the complex past and present

- Confront others with the challenges we face here and now, thereby disrupting the status quo

- Provide a window into other worlds and lives that can reveal hidden perspectives and build the case for change

- 'Imagine what might happen in the future, and so prepare for it – a feat no other species can lay claim to' (Cron 2012, p.1)

- Warn against future dangers

- Inspire and persuade people to adopt new practices

- Provide meaning, agency and direction

- Make future possibilities tangible and recruit people into realising those possibilities

- Build and maintain the institutional fabric to deliver a sustainable future

- Contribute to broader shifts in worldviews, discourses, values and paradigms.

You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone's soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows what they might do because of it, because of your words.

~ Erin Morgenstern

Discussion: Any reflections so far on the power of stories and their dual nature?

What is a story?

- A story is a particular type of communicative form with a recognisable structure and order (a beginning, middle and end), characters, a plot, and a point

- In one very common story structure, the main character faces an unexpected *challenge*, they must make a *choice* about what to do, and there is an *outcome*, which makes a moral point
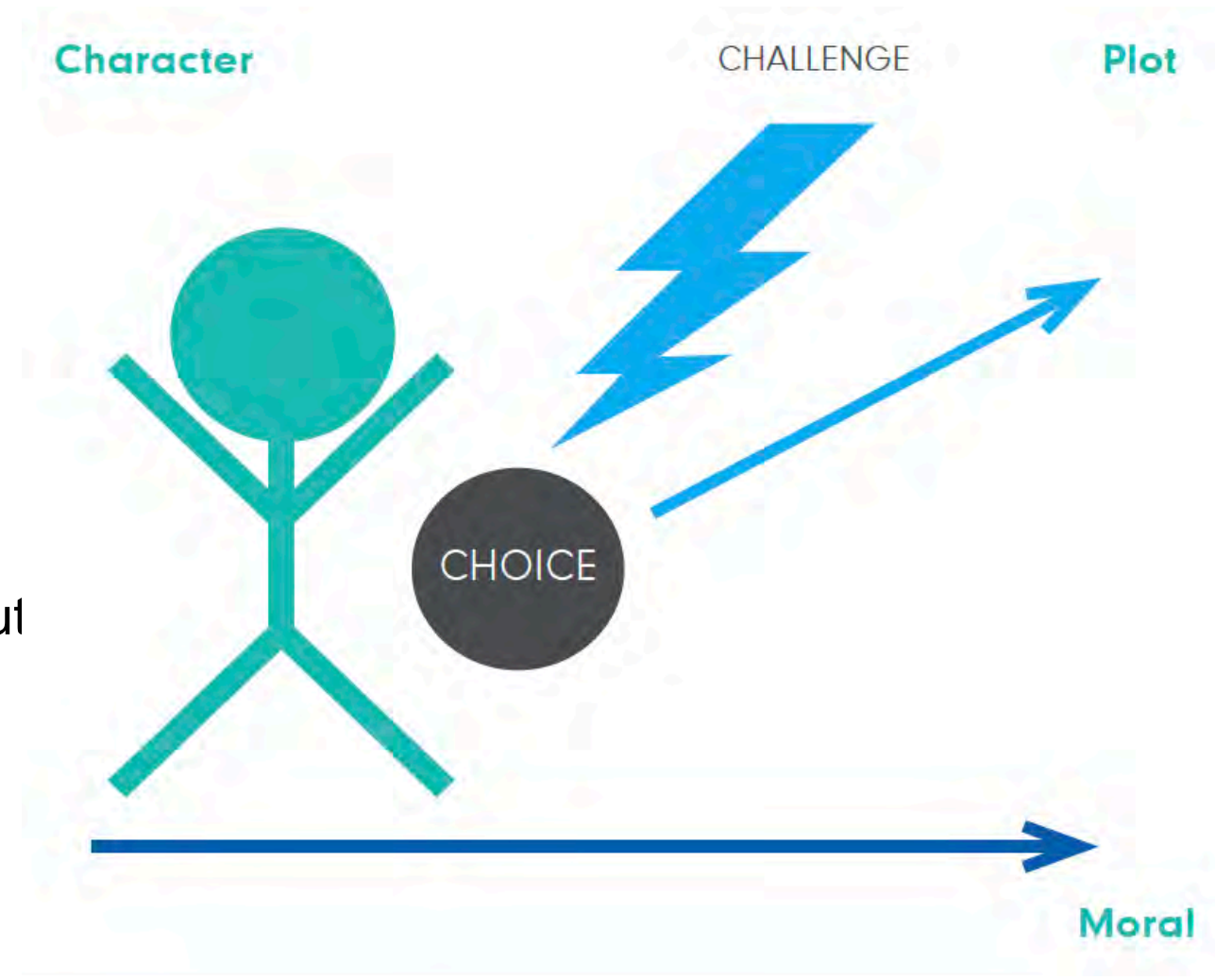
but particular narrative structures.

Storytellers construct stories from 'memes'

- **Memes**: foundational cultural artifacts that shape belief systems, attitudes, ideologies, and the like, including phrases, words, images, symbols, or other types of artifacts that resonate with people (Blackmore 2000)

- Some particular important kinds of memes for stories include:

  - **Metaphors**: understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)
  - **Frames**: Mental structures that order our ideas; and communicative tools that evoke these structures and shape our perceptions and interpretations over time (Holmes et al 2011)
  - **Tropes**: a commonly-seen theme or element of a story that becomes recognisable through repeated use, e.g. the hero's journey
  - **Archetypes**: a type of trope (usually a character) that represents something universal about the human condition, e.g. a hero, villain, trickster, scapegoat or mentor

Metaphors

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments.

Argument is war!
(Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)

Framing

- Lakoff gives the example of 'tax relief' – tax is framed as a burden that we need to be relieved of

- An alternative framing might position tax as a positive investment in our collective infrastructure

Tropes

A trope is a storytelling device or convention, a shortcut for describing situations the storyteller can reasonably assume the audience will recognize.

START
CALL TO ADVENTURE
END
MEETING A MENTOR
RETURN CHANGED
NORMAL WORLD
GETS GIFT
UNKNOWN
CROSSING THRESHOLD
ATONEMENT
THE HERO'S Journey Chart
HELPER
TRIALS + FAILURE
FINALLY CHANGES
GROWTH NEW SKILLS
REVELATION
DEATH + REBIRTH

Archetypes

THE JUNGIAN ARCHETYPES

REBEL
Goal is to create change. They are outrageous, radical, free, but also destructive.

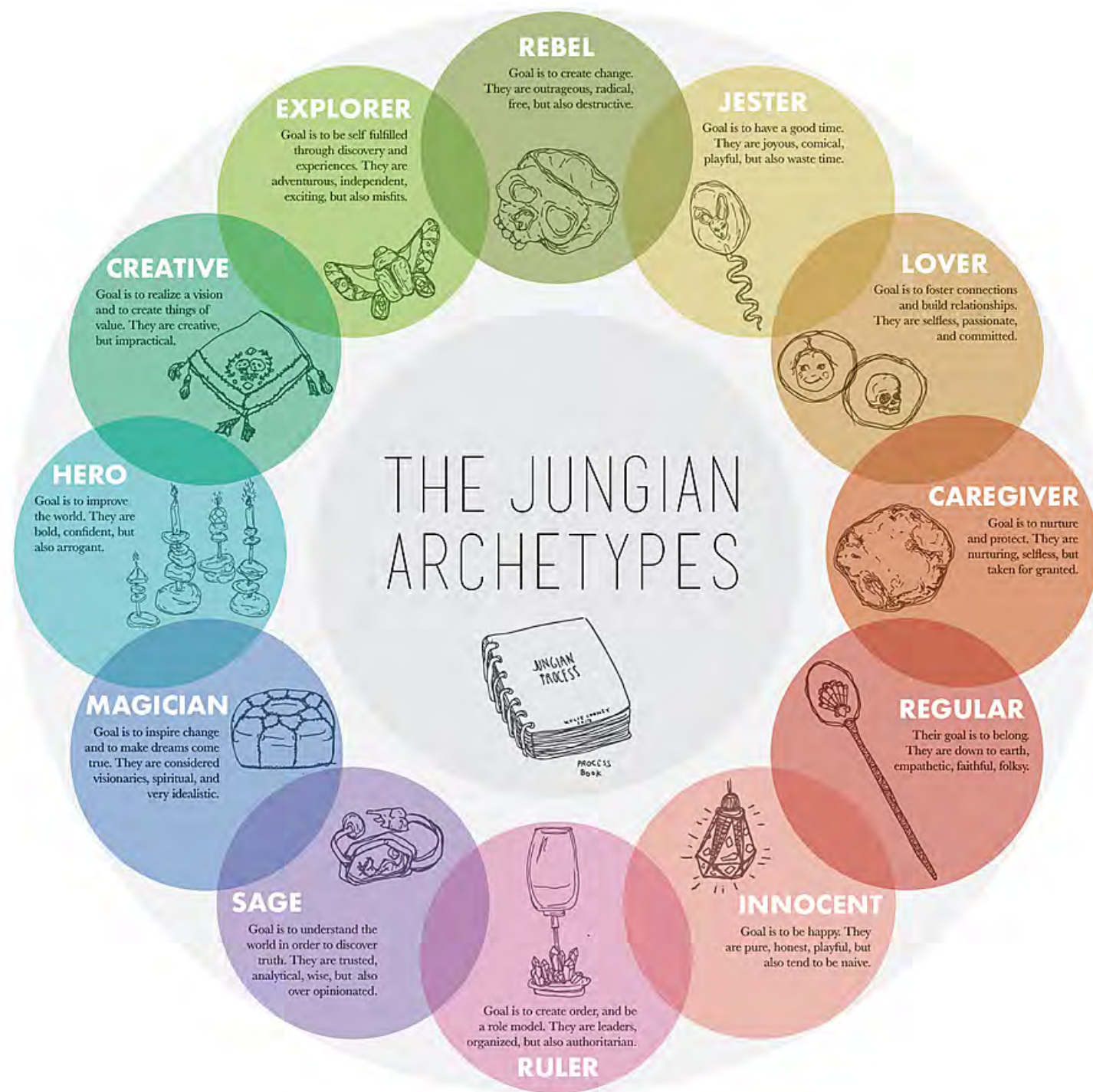**EXPLORER**
Goal is to be self fulfilled through discovery and experiences. They are adventurous, independent, exciting, but also misfits.

JESTER
Goal is to have a good time. They are joyous, comical, playful, but also waste time.

CREATIVE
Goal is to realize a vision and to create things of value. They are creative, but impractical.

LOVER
Goal is to foster connections and build relationships. They are selfless, passionate, and committed.

HERO
Goal is to improve the world. They are bold, confident, but also arrogant.

CAREGIVER
Goal is to nurture and protect. They are nurturing, selfless, but taken for granted.

MAGICIAN
Goal is to inspire change and to make dreams come true. They are considered visionaries, spiritual, and very idealistic.

REGULAR
Their goal is to belong. They are down to earth, empathetic, faithful, folksy.

SAGE
Goal is to understand the world in order to discover truth. They are trusted, analytical, wise, but also over opinionated.

INNOCENT
Goal is to be happy. They are pure, honest, playful, but also tend to be naive.

RULER
Goal is to create order, and be a role model. They are leaders, organized, but also authoritarian.

Memes: are the *all-embracing* set of ideas, word, tropes, and artifacts out of which stories can be built. In other words, metaphors, tropes, frames and archetypes can all be seen as different expressions of memes.

- **Memes** are at the **core** (foundation) of how people understand the world.

- Memes shape **understandings, attitudes, and behaviors**

- Memes work when they are **shared** (replicate), mind-to-mind with reasonably similar understandings

- **Cultural mythologies** are the (shared memes and) stories that tell different groups of people what it means to be in the world, how the world works, and what (human) purposes exist

Google

Coca-Cola

THE OLD WORLDVIEW

GOD

The Western world (Europe & USA) believe in an unchanging, patriarchal and hierarchical world. Everything is seen as separate from everything else and humans are separate from nature.

Key Leverage Points for System Transformation

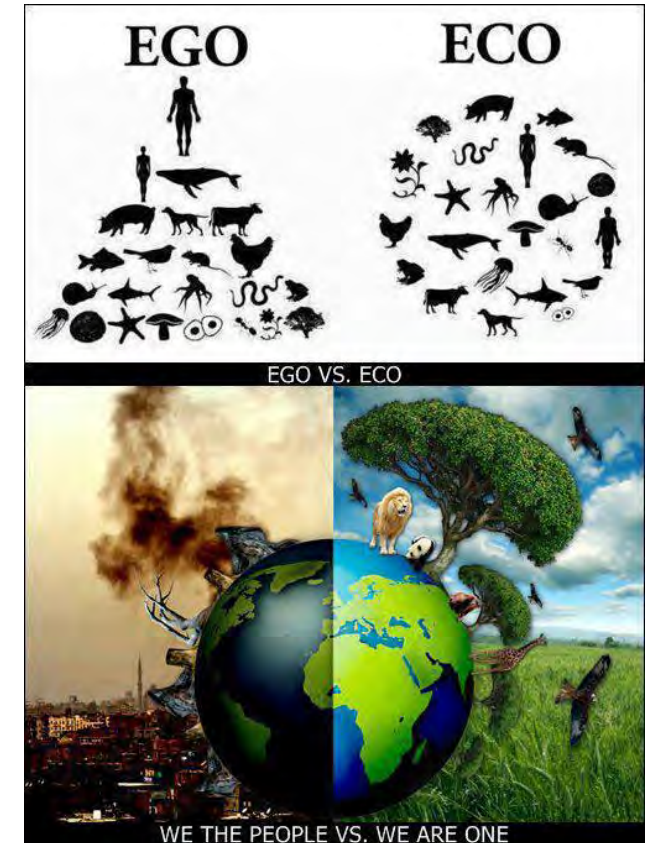…are **shifting** and **transcending** *mindsets*

- **Mindsets** are expressions of assumptions, ideas, values, attitudes, and philosophies (worldviews) that people have that shape their behaviors and practices

- **Cultural mythologies**, the stories we tell ourselves about how the world works, which are composed of memes, powerfully shape mindsets

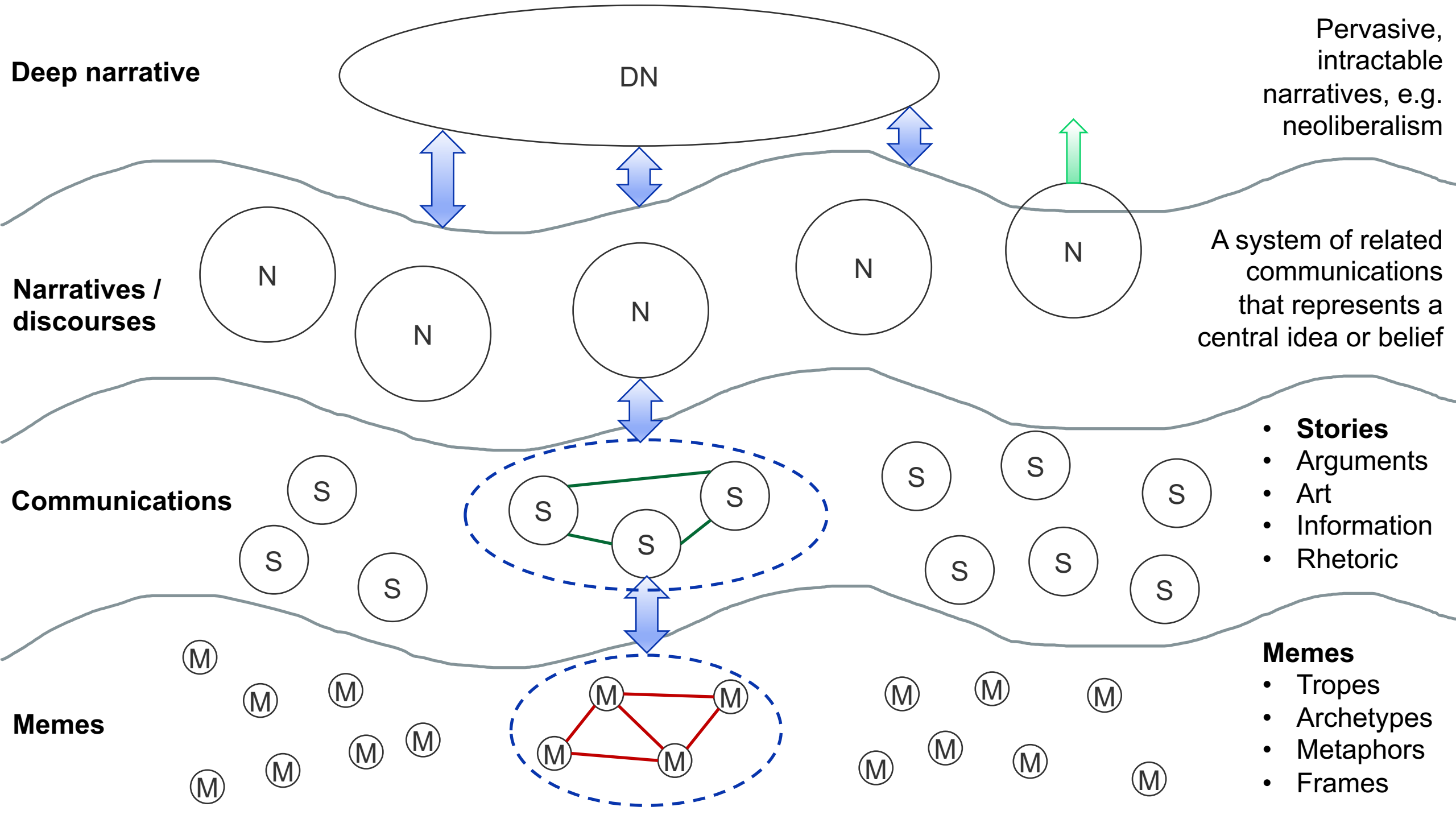- **To transform the system we need to change mindsets, memes, and stories**

Dominant memes and myths today tell us, for example that…

- Humans are separate from and should dominate nature (and other living beings)

- The purpose of societies is to grow economies

- "Wealth" means only financial wealth

- Constant economic growth (activity) is possible

- Science is the only way of knowing something

- Markets will solve all of our problems

- The *real problem* is that these memes and beliefs are creating a world that soon may not be viable for humans.

EGO   ECO

EGO VS. ECO

WE THE PEOPLE VS. WE ARE ONE

Deep narrative

DN

Pervasive, intractable narratives, e.g. neoliberalism

Narratives / discourses

N N N N N

A system of related communications that represents a central idea or belief

Communications

S S S S S S S S S S S

- **Stories**
- Arguments
- Art
- Information
- Rhetoric

Memes

M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M

Memes
- Tropes
- Archetypes
- Metaphors
- Frames

Narratives

- Many people use story and narrative interchangeably

- The distinction here draws on work by the Narrative Initiative (2017):

   Narrative - a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief

   Unlike stories, they have no standard structure

   What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning.

   Stories are told, while narratives are understood at a gut level and activated by simple words, sounds, signals and symbols

- Discourse is a similar concept

Deep narrative

- Deep narratives are characterized by pervasiveness and intractability. They provide a foundational framework for understanding both history and current events, and inform our basic concepts of identity, community and belonging (Narrative Initiative, 2017)

The story of Separation

We are separate from each other and nature

Competition, free markets and growth in GDP will deliver well-being

We live in a mechanical world that is ours to exploit

UTS

The story of Interbeing

We are a community of living beings on a living Earth

Cooperation and collaboration is needed to provide a safe and just future

We *are* nature and should work to regenerate the Earth
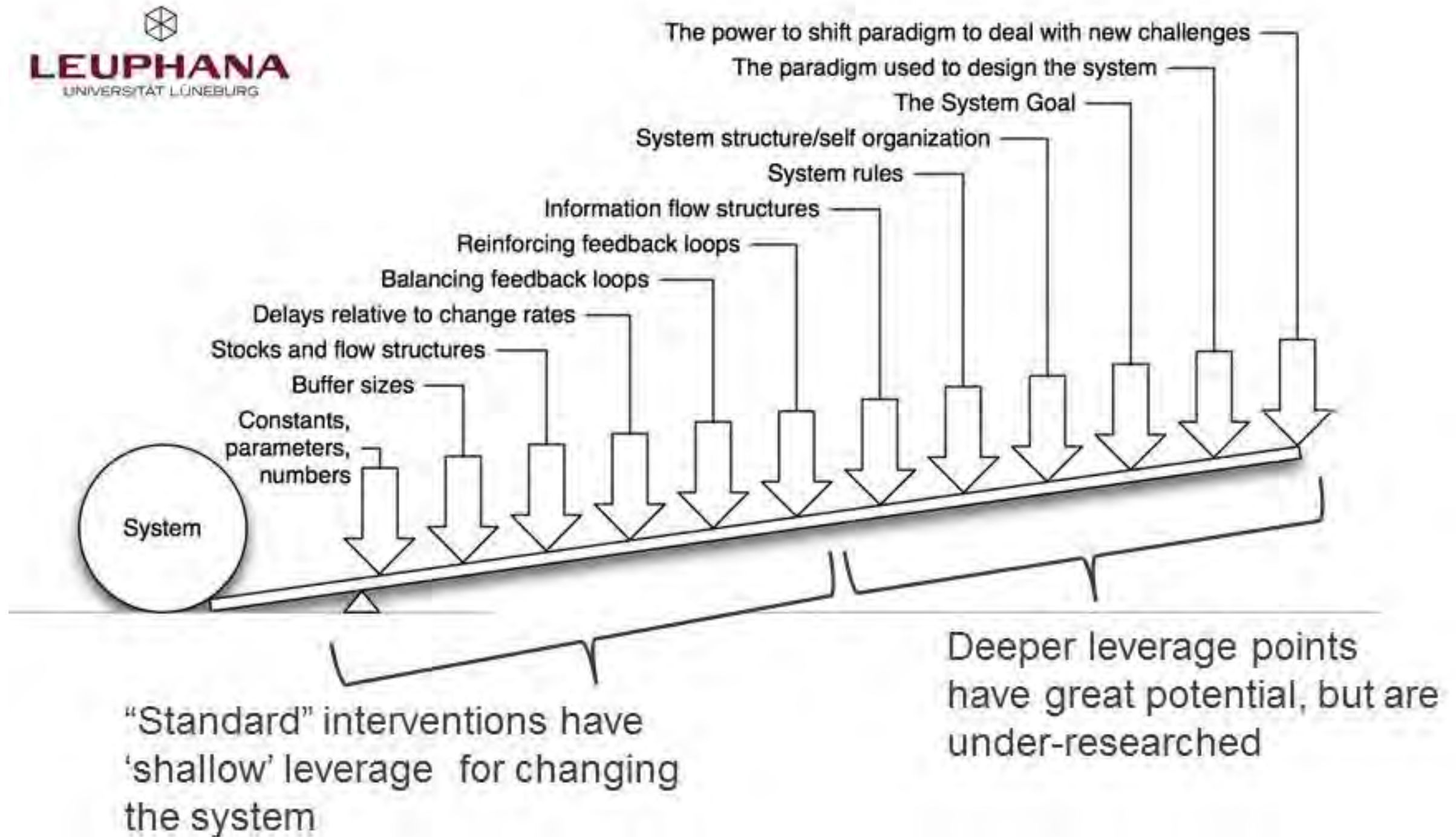
(Laughter)

LEUPHANA
UNIVERSITÄT LÜNEBURG

The power to shift paradigm to deal with new challenges
The paradigm used to design the system
The System Goal
System structure/self organization
System rules
Information flow structures
Reinforcing feedback loops
Balancing feedback loops
Delays relative to change rates
Stocks and flow structures
Buffer sizes
Constants, parameters, numbers

System

"Standard" interventions have 'shallow' leverage for changing the system

Deeper leverage points have great potential, but are under-researched

Activity

- Think about a situation that you are trying to transform:

  - Can you identify competing stories about this situation? Is there an established story that resists change? Is there an emerging story that seeks change?
  - What memes are present in these stories?
  - What are the narratives and deep narratives that give meaning to these stories?

Example – fossil fuel divestment

- Competing stories:

  Fossil fuels as cornerstone of economy – we can't afford to deal with climate change

  Fossil fuel companies as villains – we should withdraw all support for these criminals

- Story elements:

  Heroes – the ethical investor

  Villains – the fossil fuel companies

  Bystanders – governments

- Deep narratives:

  Primacy of the economy – don't do anything to hurt the economy and it will sort things out

  Primacy of people – exercising rights over how money is invested

Activity

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Building common narratives
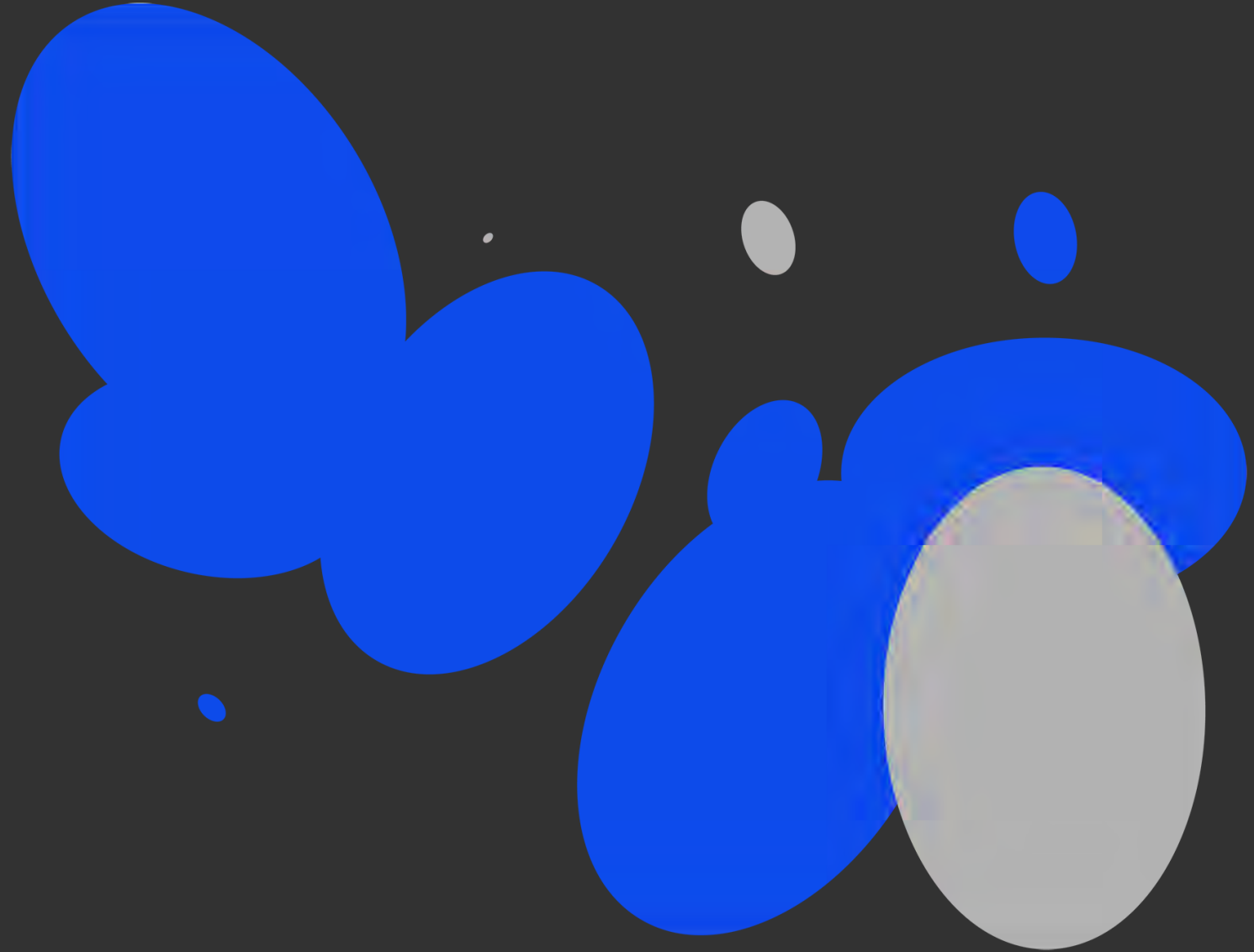
Imagine yourself in the future…

Activity – finding shared memes for an ideal future

1. Find a partner

2. Take it in turns to share your vision of 2040

3. Look for any memes that are common to both visions – write these down on sticky notes and stick onto the paper provided

4. You only have 10 minutes – make sure both of you get a turn and that you get at least 3 common memes written down

5. If you can't find 3 memes you have in common, try exploring your visions a bit more to see if you can negotiate some common ground

Activity – broadening

1. Form a group of 4

2. Share your lists of common memes

3. Write down a list of at least four memes for an ideal future that the four of you all agree on

   - Start with any memes that are on both lists
   - Add any memes that are only on one list but that the other pair really likes
   - Then, look for similar or related memes that you can connect in some way – write a new sticky note if you need to
   - If you need more, talk a bit more about your visions and look for new common memes that you can write down

Lunch
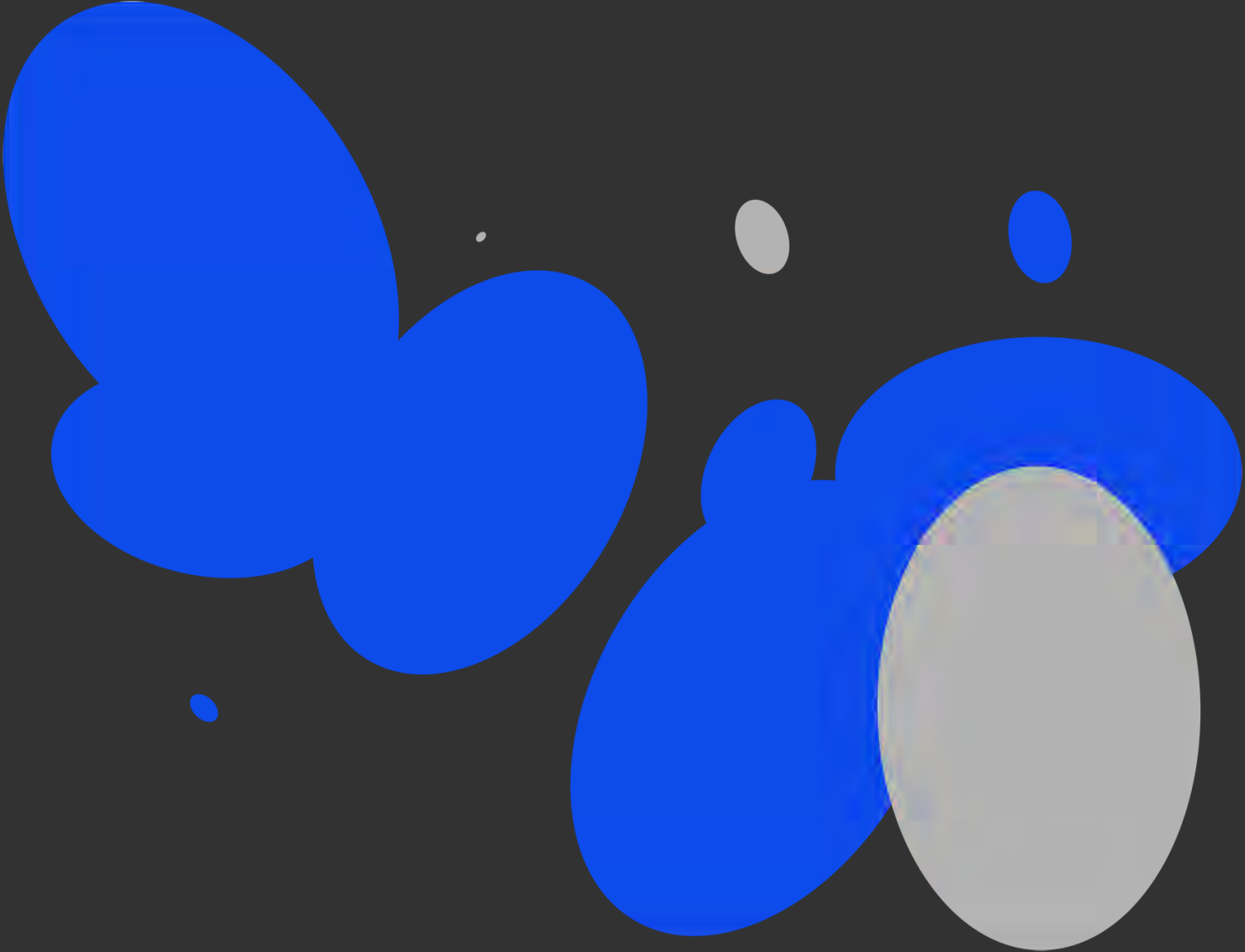
What has emerged?

The ethics of transformative storytelling
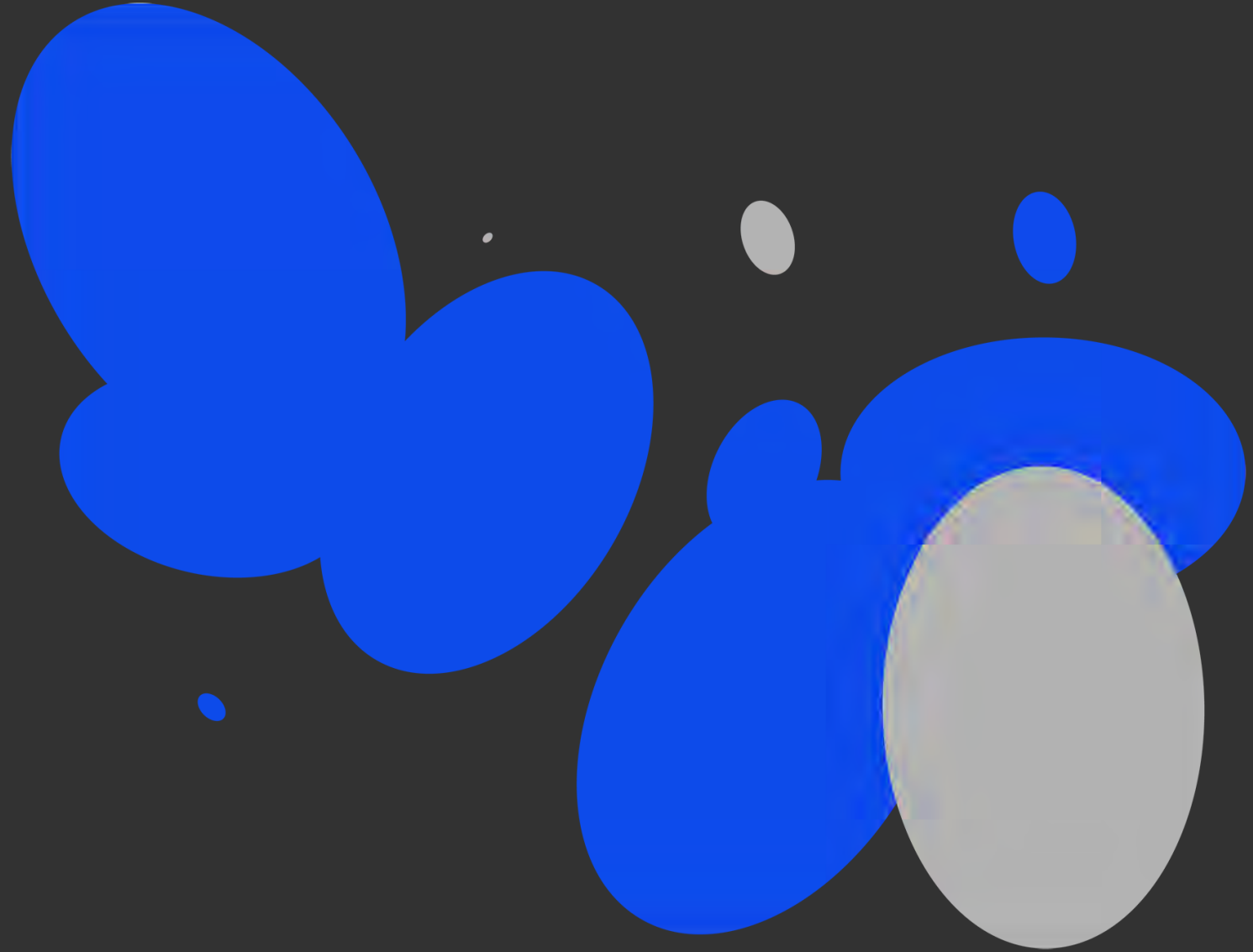
Discussion

Storytelling is a powerful technique. If humans do indeed think in story, then we are vulnerable to manipulation using story. And not everyone shares our transformative goals…

- Is it acceptable to use storytelling to promote and achieve transformation?

- In what circumstances?

- Are there particular ways it should and should not be used?

Stay true to your values: tell a story that is consistent with your vision

Transformative
storytelling practice
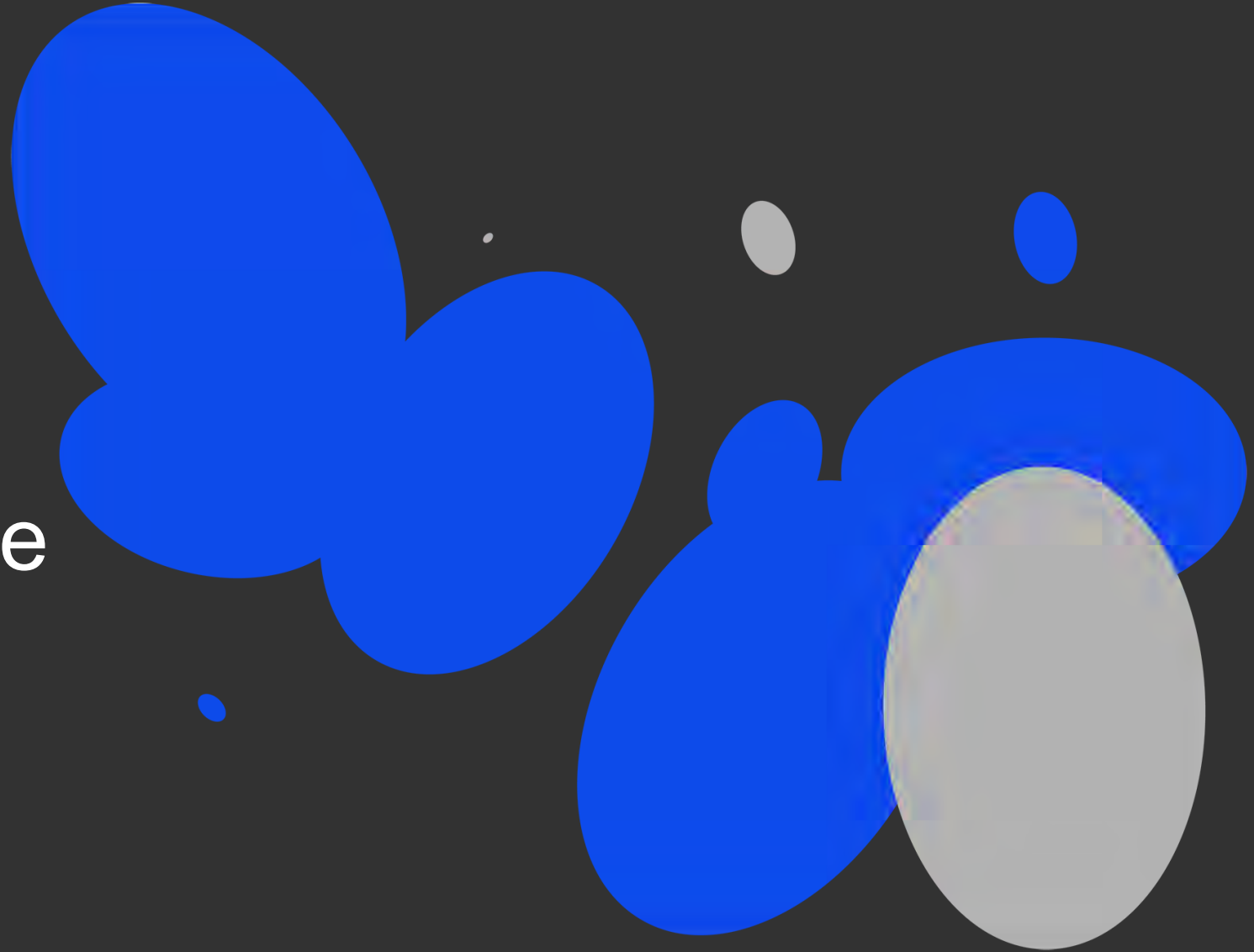
Discussion

How do memes, stories and narratives change?
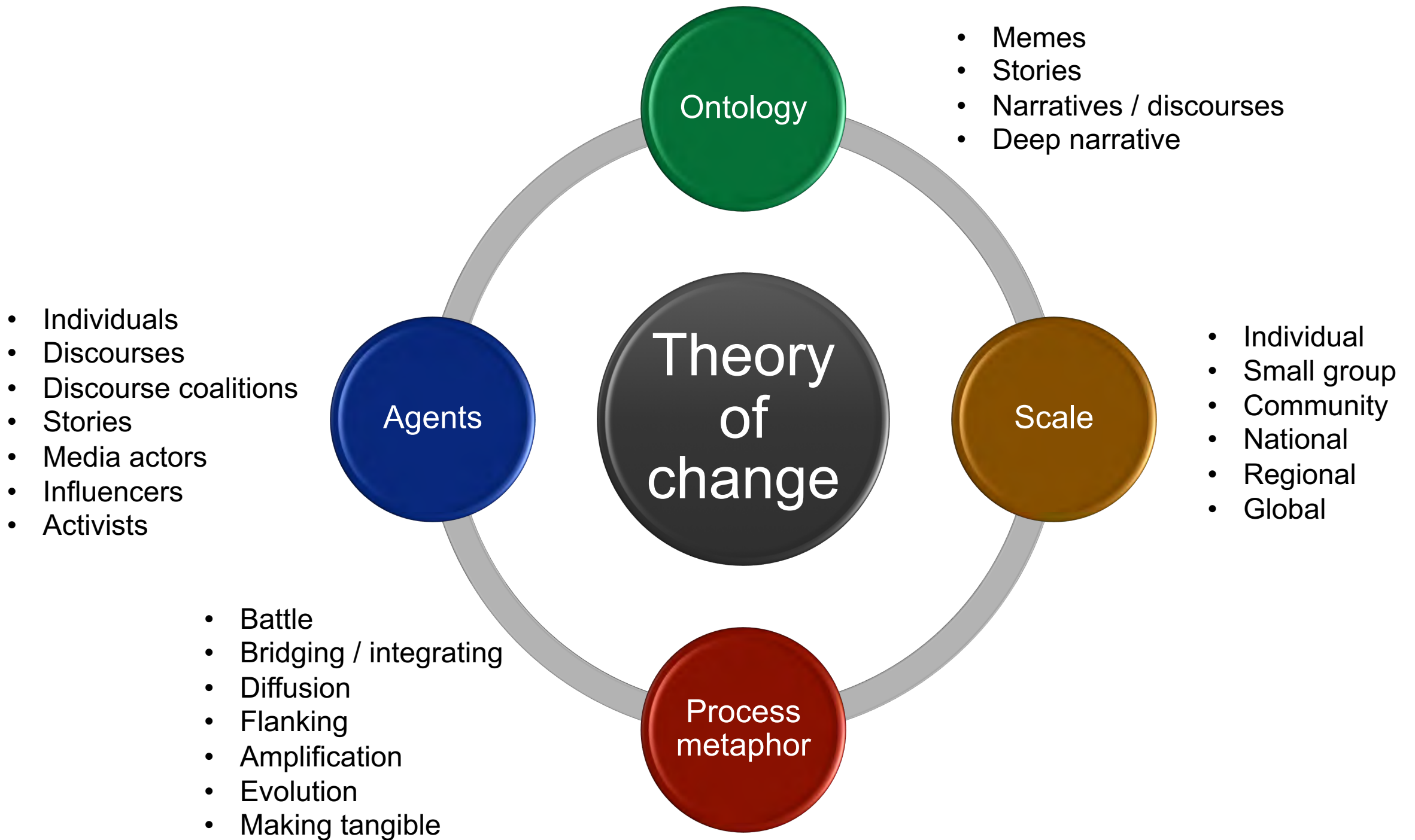
Theory of change

- Huge complexity

- But, if we boil it down, and focus in on what change agents can realistically do…most of these theories ask us to spread a more compelling meme, tell a more compelling story, or deploy a more compelling narrative

- What does compelling mean?

  - More memorable and able to stick, i.e. compatible with human brains and culture
  - Able to capture attention, perhaps through novelty or a new insight
  - Tailored to the community of interest
  - Includes a clear call and pathway to action

Tell a more compelling story!

Purpose: *Why are you telling this story? What is the issue, how are things now, and what change do you want to make?*

Audience:
Who do you want to reach? Give each segment a name, profile & some tweets.

Key Messages:
What 3 things do you want your audience to remember?

Call To Action:
What steps do you want them to take?

Story:
How does it start (hook), how does it end (jab), and what memorable moments happen in between (plot)?

People & Places:
Who will feature in our story and what locations will be used?

Style & Tone:
What does our story look and feel like? List some key imagery and reference samples. What is the musical vibe?

Campaign:
How will you get your story out there? Map the key touchpoints on a timeline.

Outcomes:
What are some of the high level outcomes you want to achieve?

Indicators:
*How will we measure success with some specific metrics?*

Purpose

- What is the situation you are trying to transform?

- Why? What is problematic about the current situation?

- What is it that you want to change?

- What would success look like?

Take 10 minutes to reflect on these questions and write some notes in the Purpose box on your Story Canvas.
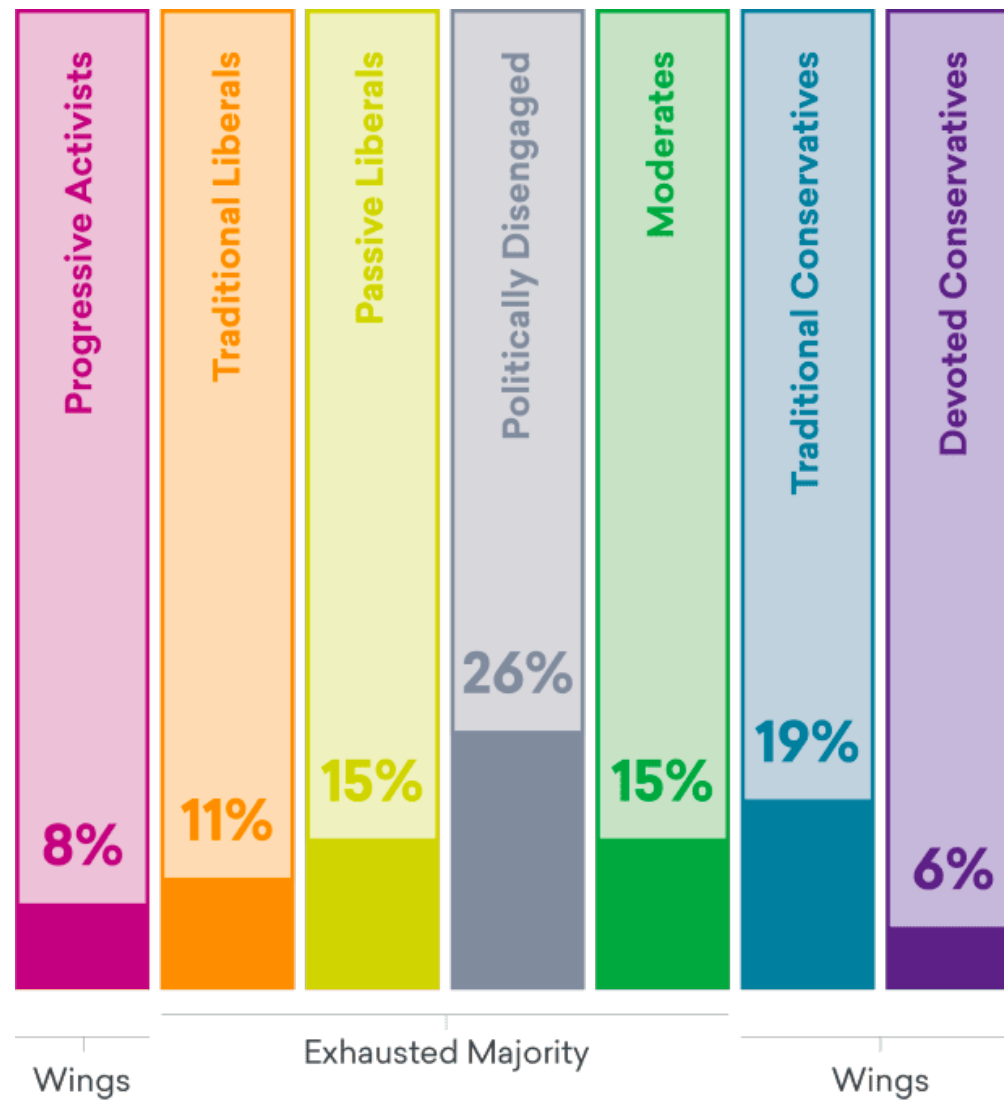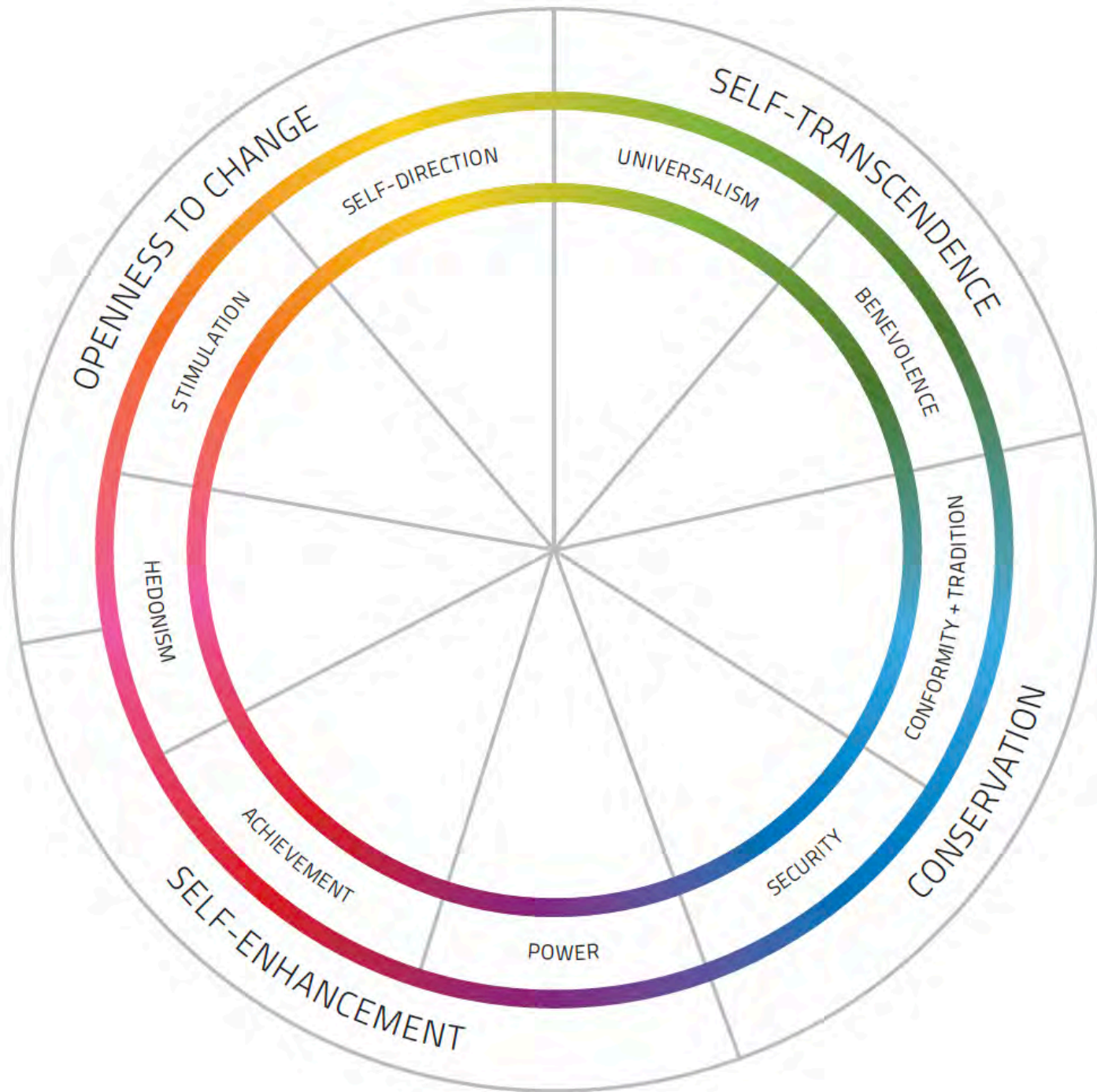
Humility is important here. We all want to change the world but what is genuinely achievable in our context with our resources?

Audience: who are you trying to persuade? What do you want them to do?

Alan Atkisson

Alarmed   Concerned   Cautious   Disengaged   Doubtful   Dismissive
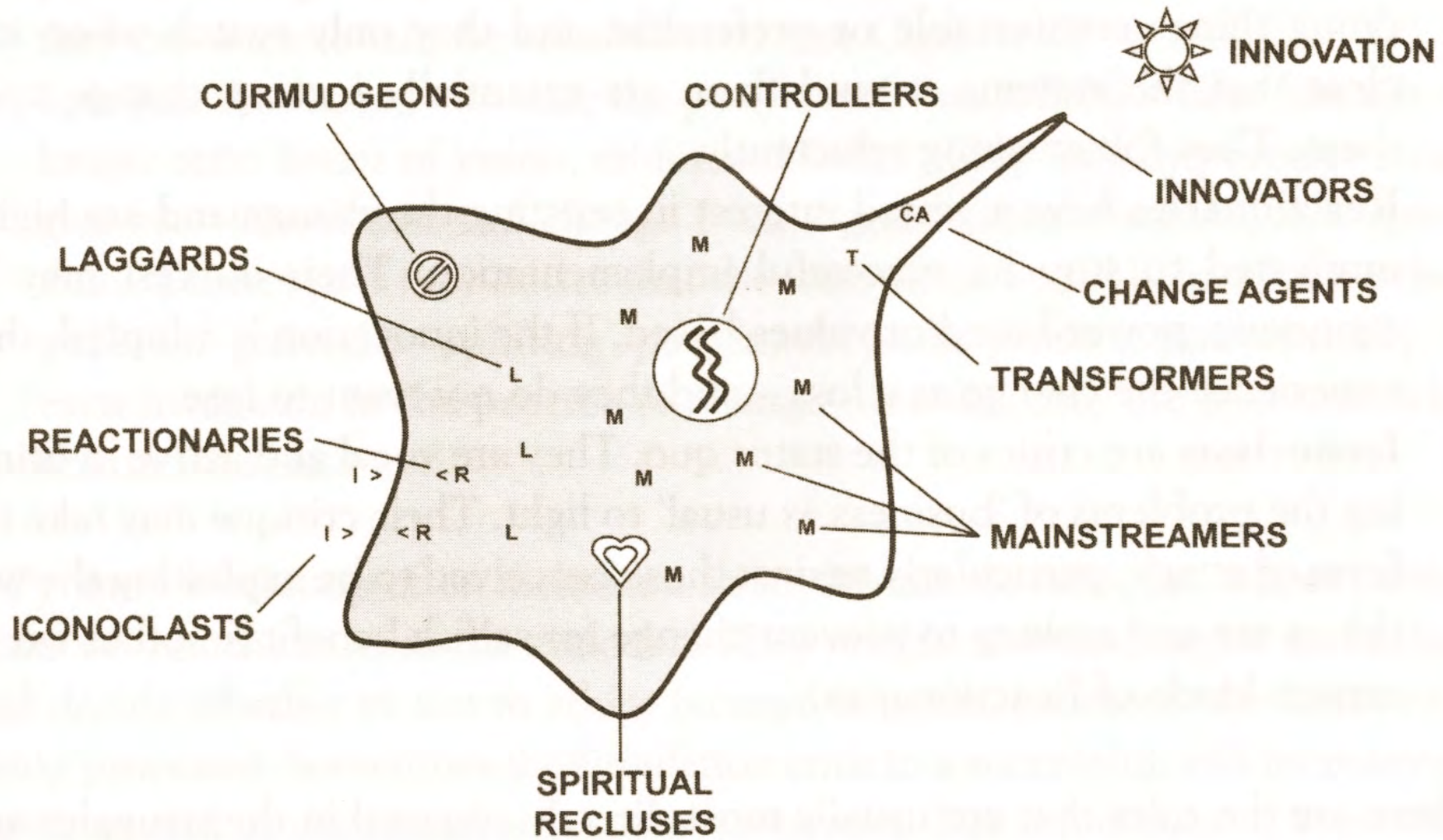
December
2018
n=1,114

29%   30%   17%   5%   9%   9%

Highest Belief in Global Warming
Most Concerned
Most Motivated

Lowest Belief in Global Warming
Least Concerned
Least Motivated

YALE PROGRAM ON
Climate Change
Communication

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
CENTER for CLIMATE CHANGE
COMMUNICATION

Your theory of change

- Key messages: What three things do you want your audience to remember?

  It might help to think back to the memes and stories we identified in the morning. And remember the big picture…

- Call to action: What steps do you want them to take?

  How can you help the audience to find agency? To feel part of a bigger transformation? To do their own storytelling and meaning making?
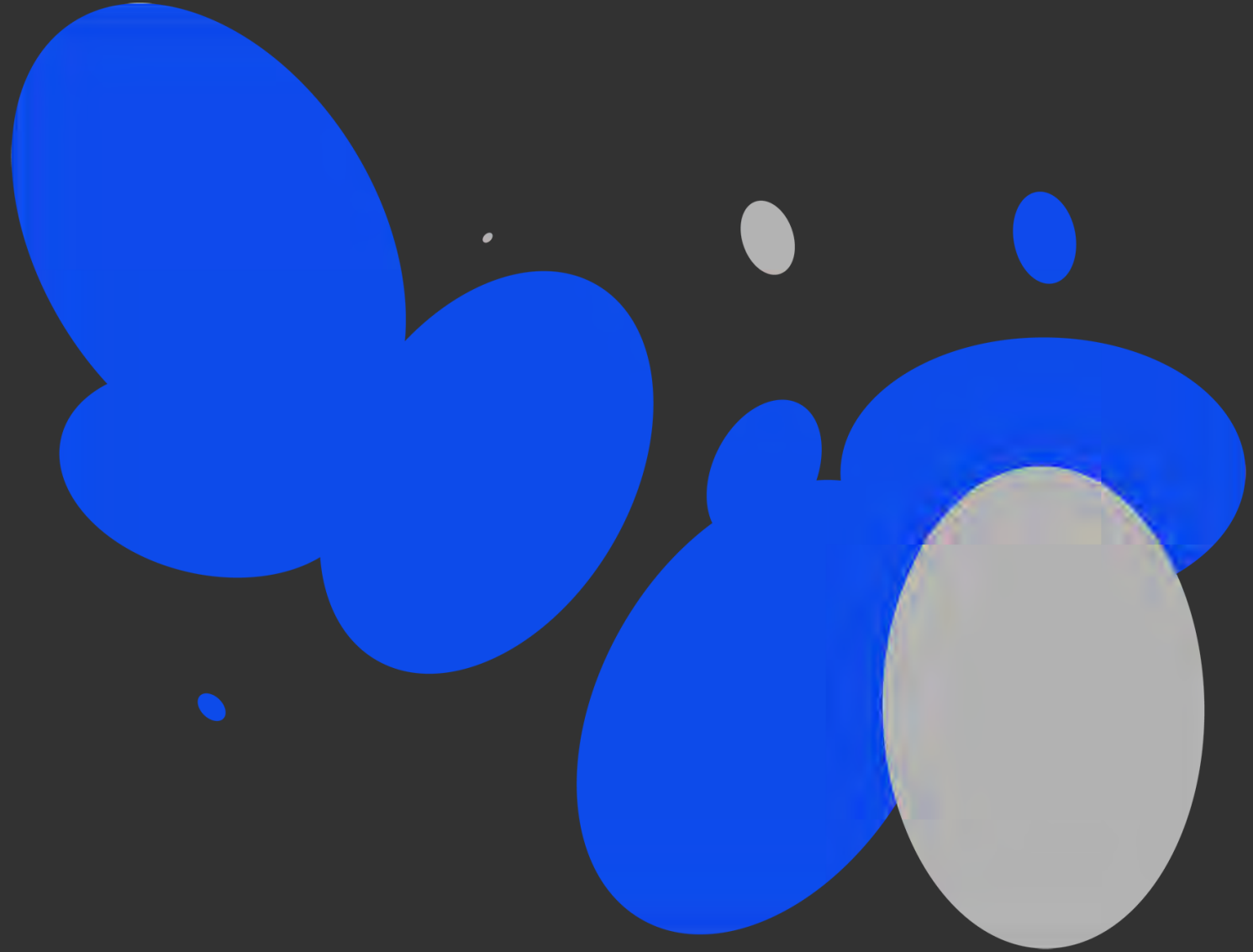
- Outcomes: What are the outcomes you want to achieve?

  This is different to purpose – it brings in your specific audience and context.

Take 10 minutes to reflect on these questions and write more thoughts on your Story Canvas.

Craft your story

**Cast your characters**: who are the key actors in your story?

Give your story a structure

Simple Story Structure
- What were things like before?
- What happened to change that?
- What was the impact of that change?

The Hook of your story is the first thing that your audience will see or hear in your story and should shock, surprise, delight or intrigue them to continue watching your story.

25%

SETTING UP the STORY

50%

ACTION, CHANGE TENSION EXCITEMENT

25%

RESOLUTION
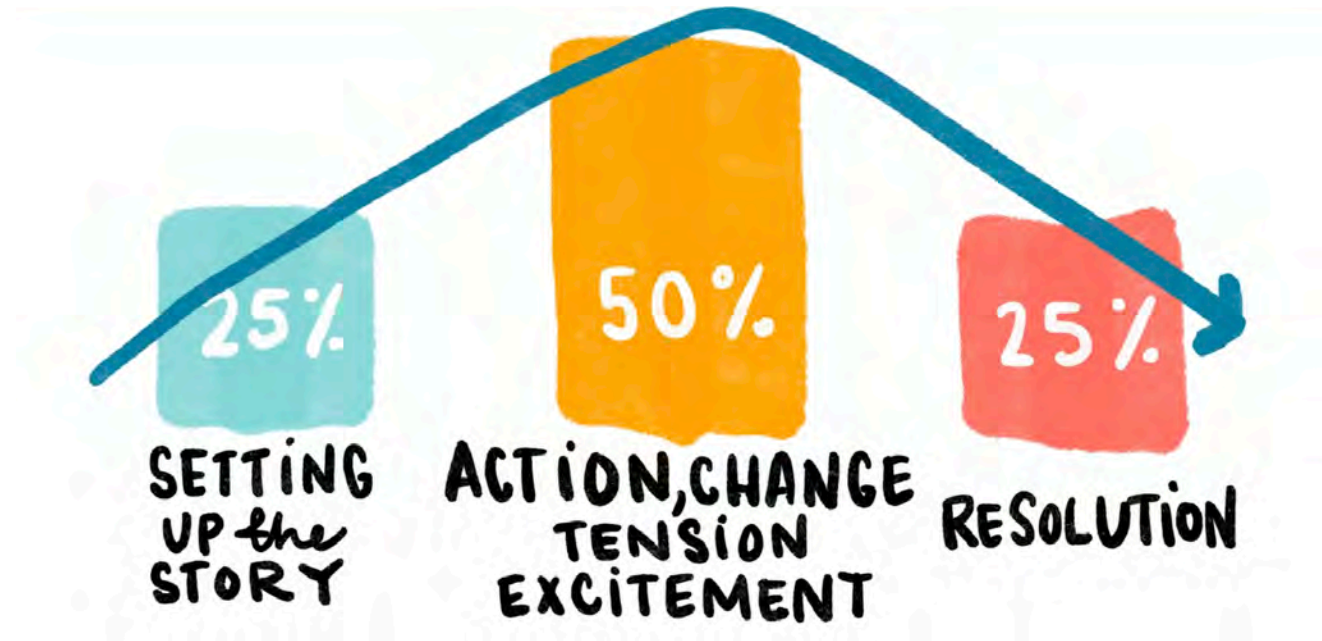
The Jab is how you end, and is often what your audience will remember.
- How can you connect back to your 'Purpose' for the story?
- How can you communicate what this means on a human level?
- What is the vision for the future?

Character

CHALLENGE

Plot

CHOICE

Moral
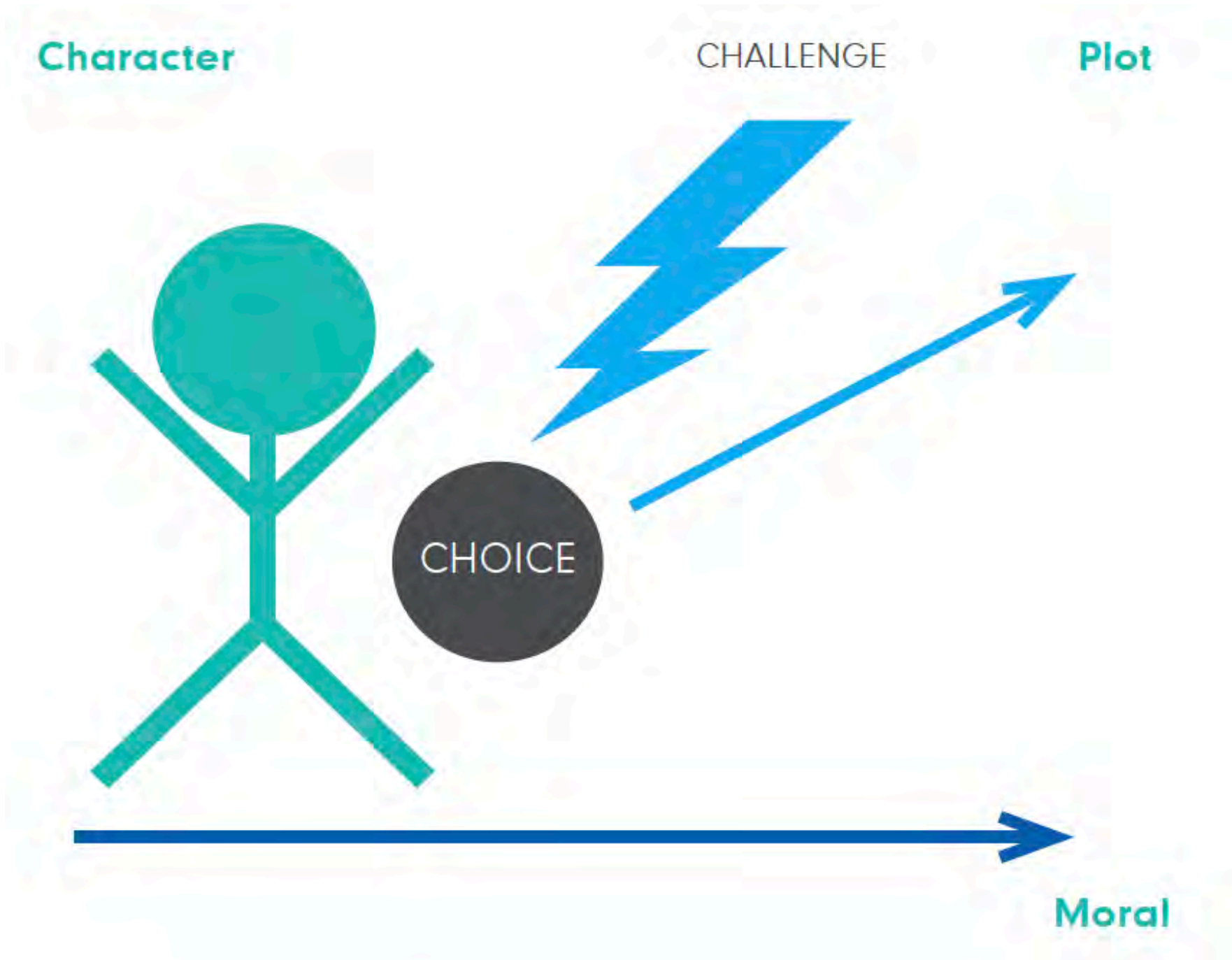
ACF (2017)

Greater than Fear

In Minnesota, we're better off together
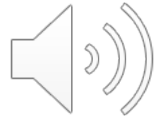
- Memes

    Greater = Greater Minnesota

    Together

    Better off

    Shoveling snow together

Minnesota's Strength Minnesota's strength comes from our ability to be there for each other – to knit together people from different places and of different races into a community. For this to be a place of freedom for all, we cannot let the greedy few and the politicians they pay for divide us against each other based on what someone looks like or how much money they have. It's time we talk to each other and stand up for anyone getting bullied or shut out by ugly rhetoric. We must pick leaders who honor the Golden Rule, treating others as they want to be treated. Together, we can make this a place where freedom and community are for everyone, no exceptions.

the HERO'S journey

ACF (2017)

Activity – draft your story

1. Choose one of the structures presented.

2. See if you can come up with the outline of a story following that structure, which aligns with your theory of change.

3. Think back to the stories from this morning, and the common memes – can any of those play a role?

Take 30 minutes to have a go at this and fill out other boxes on the story canvas if you wish

Report back

Story Canvas process

Activity – share your story

1. Take it in turns to share your Story Canvas with the group

2. For everyone listening, think about any constructive feedback on how to increase the impact and transformative potential of the story. Think particularly about:

   - The Hook: How can the story capture attention in a crowded media environment?
   - The Jab: How can you give the audience agency aligned with your purpose?
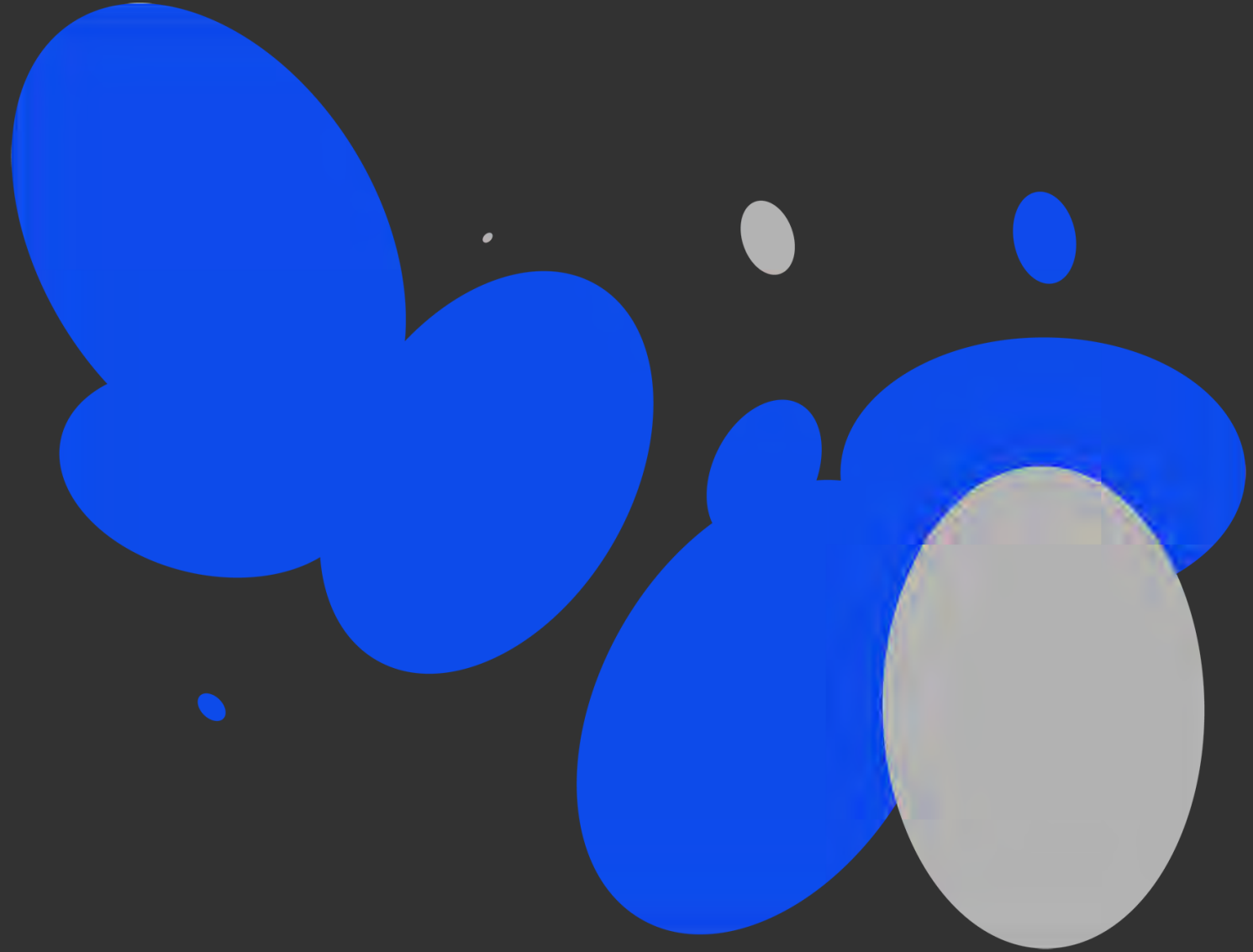
Capturing attention: use surprise, empathy, emotion, authenticity and tangibility

Give the audience agency: help them see a path to action

The story
continues

Reflection

What is one reflection on today's workshop that you would like to share?

What is one 'next step' for your transformative practice after this workshop?

https://utsau.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bCN249czvBGEEC1

Survey links

[Feedback Survey](#)

[New Stories for a Sustainable Future](#)
(planetcentric.net/blog/new-stories)