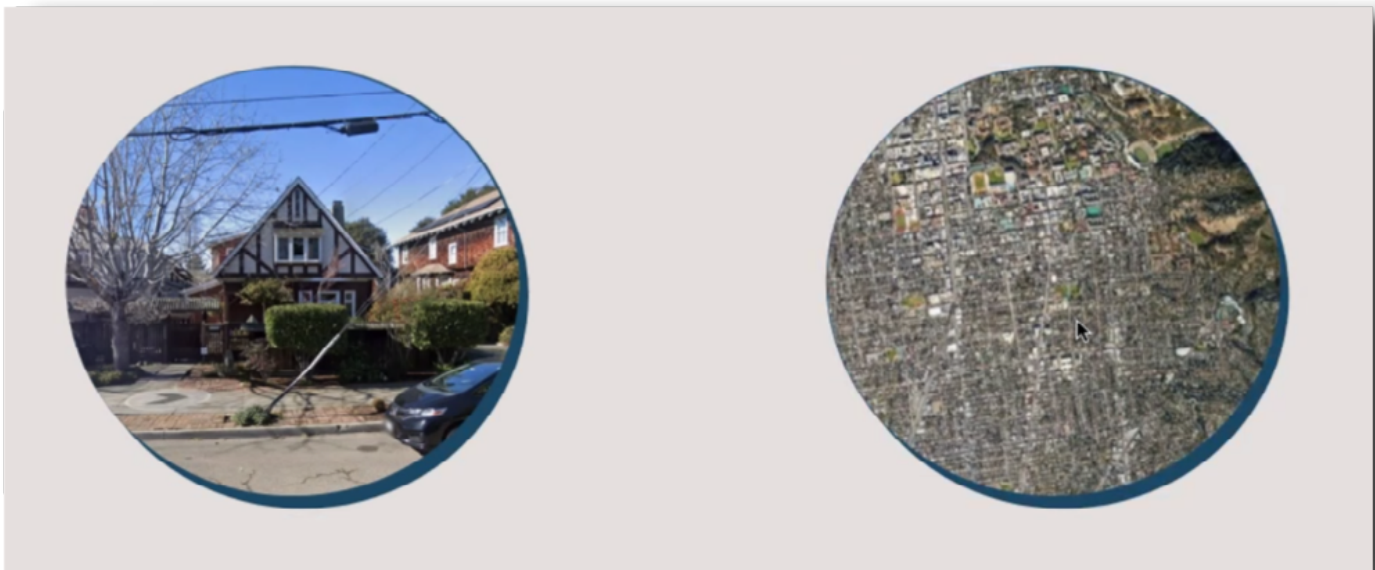


Systems Storytelling Initiative Synopsis of Community of Practice Session #5, April 27, 2022

Joanne Cheung opened the fifth COP session with a provocation: “Systems and stories appear irreconcilable. Stories are static and linear. Systems are emergent. Stories are about experiences, usually told from individual perspectives. Systems are about behaviors. Systems need dynamic representations because they behave in ways that are different from history and from stories that we tell. How do we reconcile them?”

Drawing on her formal training in photography and architecture, Joanne reflected that architecture “is a way to calibrate across scale, from the small to the large, and from the concrete to the theoretical.” Continuing with that analogy, Joanne shared two visuals:



She explains:

If you look at only one and not the other, you don't have any context of what you're looking at. This is what we are trying to reconcile across stories and systems. They are such different ways of seeing, but we need them as context for each other. We need to toggle between the two scales, between the system and the human scale. What could that look like for system storytelling?

Joanne also spoke about the dynamism of systems, posing several questions about how we can use stories to make the past 'legible', while developing tools to visualize and shape the future:




This is the stolen years of life of every single person who died from gun violence in America in 2018. You can see not only the total systemic view of what happened that entire year and across time, but you can also hover over each individual line, a trajectory of someone's would-be life, to see who they were. I find this powerful because it treats individual humans as stories while also giving a systemic context to each individual's story, so you can see how systemic this problem is.

Systems need these dynamic representations because they behave in ways that are different from history and from stories that we tell. What does that look like? There's a need to toggle between the two scales, between the system and the human scale. We need them as context for each other. What could that look like for system storytelling? Then, thirdly, what is the role of the human agency? What are some of the tools, including formulation that can be used for collaborative decision making? How does that shape our choices about the future?

Next, **Philippa Kabali-Kagwa** shared her process as an oral storyteller, poet, and coach, and then she read a poem she authored to capture her experience working with health activists in South Africa, an excerpt of which is included below. Reflecting on her process, Philippa shared:

I put story at the center of the way that I work. I use it as a sense-making tool. I see the ability of story to hold things together that don't really make sense. Working with people, storytelling becomes a powerful tool because you are able to bring different perspectives together as a way of making sense of the work. In my work, I help the system see itself. I also help the actors in the system reflect on the story they tell themselves about the system and the story they tell themselves about themselves.



To do that, you have to build self-reflection into the process. You have to get people to slow down, listen more deeply, and ask more questions. You have to help them understand how things that have happened in the past are still living within the system, even as we move forward. Going through self-reflection and getting to a deeper understanding is an iterative process. Only then you can ask, 'How do we then intervene?'

When I work with story, a lot of it is about orality and being present. When I tell a story in an oral tradition, how I tell the story always changes depending on how I am feeling that day, who is in the room, how I am reading the audience, and what feedback the audience is giving me. There's a constant conversation happening, which is emergent. The story unfolds in a different way because of what is happening in the room. For me, this captures the dimensionality of systems change. When I facilitate groups, when I explore a system, when I listen to people: I must pay attention to things that seem insignificant, because those might be the most significant things in terms of how to change the system.

Philippa then shared the experience of working with a Fellowship Program comprised of young health activists who were trying to understand the health system and determine ways to improve it. Experts gave lectures on social determinants of health and many other topics, and then the activists were sent into the communities of Sandton, known as the richest square mile of Johannesburg, and Alexandra, one of the roughest and largest townships in Johannesburg, to ask questions and bring their learnings back.


She wrote a poem to capture that emotional experience and to remind herself that “story always gets the head and the heart talking.” Her poem is excerpted here:

We said, “Go see the social determinants of health in real life. See the system in action.” We said to them, “Engage with the present and the past. Look with new eyes, pay attention, listen to the stories.” The rest of us sat in a large empty room waiting for them to return.

They walked in as if their souls had for a moment taken flight. We, bound by the clock, stuck to the agenda. We forgot the power we had to change the process. That making space for grief was as important as theorizing and researching. They walked in, the pain of generations etched on their faces, breath caught. For in the landscape so familiar, they had found mirror shots reflecting back a story of yesterday, heavy, unspoken, yet still lived out loud today.

In the mine and workers museum, as they glimpsed lives of the miners stripped of their dignity, risking lives in the belly of the Earth, creating wealth they would never have, the faceless, unnamed miners took on the faces of their fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and brothers. From here they returned home broken and hurt. Home where they could not speak of what they endured, the pain and the shame still alive and fresh. Home where they were misunderstood, seen as hard and cold because no one knew where they had been.

At Freedom Park, they felt the struggles of generations of mothers, fathers, grandfathers fighting for home and dignity and houses and land for freedom and the right to be, yet losing, always losing. This was not new, and yet today, as they reentered spaces they knew so well, they saw them anew. A quiet crack echoed loudly across generations, shooting pain through their hearts. "What has changed?" it asked. "What has changed?"



Today, as we sat in this large body-filled room after they had spoken, and we had remembered and danced, sang, cried, cajoled their souls back into their bodies and their bodies had warmed the room, we began to ask, “How do we change the system? Where do we begin?”

The systems storytelling COP members reflected on the powerful and searing interventions of Joanne and Philippa as **several themes** emerged:

1. Creating the conditions for a ‘third way’ to emerge

We’re talking about toggling between systems scale and human scale to give a fuller context and complement each other, which is reminiscent of how during our previous discussion we explored dancing between two ways of knowing until a third way emerges. It feels like we’re hovering over something important: in systems storytelling, we’re trying to create the conditions to merge different things - different ways of knowing, different scales, etc. - so that our understanding becomes more clear.

We live in a world of binaries. What we keep coming back to is engaging the space inbetween - between the human scale and the system scale, the rational side and the emotional side. Systems storytelling is engaging with all of those things and having conversations back and forth between them.

2. Playing with scale and dimension in ‘seeing’ systems

A visual representation makes the complexity so much more clear. You can zoom in on one family’s daily experience. But when you zoom out, you see all of the broader influences: transport lines, food availability, so much more. You can’t assume just because you know the family unit you understand all of the broader things that affect it.

Another way to think about the human scale and the systems scale, or the zoom lens and the wide-angle lens, is to think about the distinction between episodic storytelling and thematic. Episodic storytelling is the zoom lens, the portrait of the individual. Thematic is the wide-angle lens, what’s happening in the broader landscape. There’s an assumption that our stories are one or the other. What about a story that is both episodic and thematic? Or what about a story that’s a series of exposures, of portraits, that illustrates the broader landscape?

For thousands of years there are two ways, two practices, of understanding how mindfulness and meditation works. A concentration practice is when you focus on a single point, like your breath or your sensations - much like the human scale or zoom focus we’re talking about. Another practice, sometimes called choice-less awareness, is when you’re aware of everything - infinite awareness in all directions is the aspiration, which is analogous to the system scale or wide-angle lens. Those practices map well onto this conversation about dimensionality.



3. Slowness and stillness

We live in a fast food world of getting things done, generating ideas quickly, keeping things moving. We forget that sometimes we need stillness. Sometimes you need to just stand still and wait, because you have no idea what is going on. You need to see what's going on before you know what to do next.

There's so much patience required in this work, and that is really devalued a lot.

I think about the importance of cadence and the effect that stories can have in shaking up our thinking. Stories that are unconventional can slow things down. They force us to think and engage with content in ways that aren't as fast and fluid but are more effortful and, arguably, more transformative. They may not actually be the stories that are the most somatically rewarding and comforting to hear, but they probably are the most important ones when we think about systems, in that they can lead people to consider new perspectives and shift mindsets.

4. Legibility & illegibility - the tension between knowing and mystery

Fields like science, mathematics, medicine are always in search of an answer, a diagnosis. Often, our storytelling approaches for systems have that same diagnostic stance: can we make what is happening here legible so we can understand it and diagnose it? But there's a difference to approaching a system with a desire to seek an answer or a diagnosis rather than just a desire to experience it and hope that experience will lead us in the direction of a range of possibilities. Approaching systems with the stance of not knowing, and staying grounded in not knowing, is a valid stance. It makes us better interpreters of the world. Not everything needs to be understood in exactly the way we want to understand it. Just not knowing is a valid stance.

There are dimensions beyond space and time, and I wonder how we leave space for that as we seek to understand systems. How do we leave space for mystery and the unknown and have reverence for that?