

# The Storytellers' Guide to Changing Our World

Culture Surge is a women-of-color led coalition of storytellers, artists, organizers and researchers working together in this vital moment for the survival of our communities, our democracy, and our shared future.

[www.culturesurge.com](http://www.culturesurge.com)



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## Dear Storytellers,

You, our artists and storytellers, have the power to change the world through the stories you tell. You and those who preceded you throughout history have done it time after time, telling compelling stories that inspired us to imagine our best future — stories about our power to make the world we want.

Now, facing this era's most important election, with demands for fundamental change rising across America, we need you to do it again.

As we near the election, we stand at the intersection of three deadly plagues — systemic racism, the global pandemic, and an historic economic depression. These plagues are lethally inflicting loss and pain on all, but especially and disproportionately on Black, Indigenous, people of color, and others forced to live on the margins. The protests sweeping the country are led by those who have been most impacted by these plagues and most active in creating a more just world. These incredible leaders, especially Black women and transgender people, have made the need for fundamental change suddenly visible and urgent for a majority of people around the world.

For this moment to continue and be truly transformational, we need to inspire even more people to take action — to take over the streets when necessary, to protest loudly, to continuously hold public servants accountable, and also to vote for people at every level — from neighborhood councils to the White House — who will be part of the solution instead of worsening the problem. We need to inspire friends and loved ones to join.

How do we bring more people into this movement for civic engagement at this critical moment of possibility?

A flood of stories of our personal agency and freedom have always preceded our most important moments of progress, shifting power from an elite few to the people. Culture Surge knows we need stories to move more people to change their world. Lived experience, common sense,

and a ton of detailed research says there is a core story that has proven most powerful to inspire and motivate people to act right now. This story's transformational power comes from two crucial threads: imagining a world where everyone is free and everyone belongs, and understanding that such a world is possible if we, the people, act collectively to demand it.

Culture Surge knows that if artists and storytellers rally around this core storyline, telling their own particular piece of it in their own particular way, the transformative power of all our storytelling will be woven together and exponentially strengthened.

One expression of the core story goes like this:

**WE, the people,  
Have the power.  
Acting together,  
Caring for each other,  
WE will imagine and create  
The world we want and need—  
Joyful, protected and safe,  
Where we each belong,  
Where we all can thrive.**

Culture Surge is here to support the telling of this core story in an infinite variety of forms, in countless voices, from thousands of viewpoints, including especially the voices of those whose stories are not widely heard. Most important, we believe each story told must be true to each storyteller's personal creative vision. The sum of all our creations will produce a strong, many-layered, multi-textured tapestry of unique and united stories that will transform this moment of possibility into a realization of true justice and equity for all.

Our mission at Culture Surge is to support storytellers who want to do this. This guide is a first step. There are many next steps. We look forward to taking them together with you.

**Yours in solidarity,  
Culture Surge**

**CULTURE SURGE**

# Introduction

This short guide will help you explore the core story that can engage more people in co-creating a just and equitable world. It also describes Culture Surge’s work, the research this work is based on, and how stories power change. We hope it will inspire and inform your storytelling. We also invite you to:

- Find more resources, meet collaborators, learn more about our briefings and create-a-thons, and more. [Sign up now.](#)
- Share your stories inspired by this guide on social media with the hashtag **#culturesurge** so we can connect and spread them further with our amazing distribution network!

- Share this guide with other storytellers.
- Email us with questions or ideas. [hello@culturesurge.com](mailto:hello@culturesurge.com)



# — Exploring the Core Story and its Threads



Think of the six threads below as some of the rich storytelling areas within our core story. Exploring them can lead to an infinite trove of stories and subplot ideas that fit with the core story. You can probably see some of these threads within the stories you are already telling or hoping to tell.

The story threads that speak to you may be internal and personal — how you or another person were moved to realize your own power and take action; how after times of crisis new groups of leaders are emerging to build better systems rather than simply restoring old ones. The stories may be rooted in

a cause or community or not. They can be about lived or imagined experiences, about how things could or will be, how victories have been won and how more will follow.

These stories can and should be told in any and all forms — film and video, paintings, posters, poetry, murals, songs, symphonies, dance, photographs, books, magazine stories, pamphlets, social posts, ads, letters to the editor and on and on. Fiction and nonfiction. Short and long.

There is always a strong temptation, especially with a national election

underway, to abandon inspirational storytelling and focus solely on what and who we are against. (And there is so much to fight against!) There are also those who believe it's enough to only broadcast the message: "Vote!" But this fails to support our long-term mission to imagine and build the world we want, and it goes against a lot of research that finds such tactics, at best, don't affect turnout or the election's outcome at all and, at worst, can backfire.

All we're saying is what's obvious to any creative person: There are many, many ways to tell a story of personal agency

and a better world. Each story may incorporate one or all of the threads we highlight; and there are, of course, many others that will be discovered and used. We know creative work should not and cannot be regimented. That's why we do not endorse a uniform tagline or a particular word, phrase or "message frame." Rather, what we need is for diverse storytellers to create a wildly diverse range of stories that share these important elements so the potential for change and reach are maximized.

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## STORY THREADS

# Together, we have the power.

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## IDEAS

### Stories of personal and collective power.

Each person has power. Collectively, the power of people to make change is unlimited. These collections of people may be a block group, a community of faith, a national organization or any other expression of social, political or spiritual union. When people realize their power, unite and work together, they've shown they can beat the many

corporations that put their profits ahead of our well-being, and the powerful and the politicians who seek to control us. The stories of these victories can be found in communities across the country and the world.

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## STORY EXAMPLES



1. [IllumiNative's #WarriorUp Campaign](#)



2. [How the long-term work of three Minneapolis organizations](#) helped defund the police.

3. [K-Pop and Tik Tok teens organize against Trump's rally](#) in Tulsa that disrespected Juneteenth and the Tulsa Massacre.



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More examples can be found at:  
[bit.ly/storytellersexamples](https://bit.ly/storytellersexamples)

## STORY THREADS

# There is abundance.

## IDEAS

### Stories that show there's more than enough for everyone.

Our country has the resources to ensure everyone has a good life. There's enough money and talent to create and sustain the opportunities and public institutions essential for our common good. Truly representational government would provide world-class health care, excellent neighborhood schools, preeminent and free colleges, advanced skills training, beautiful parks, first-class public transportation, needed clean-energy infrastructure and so much more. We can showcase the value of helping one another in many ways: Tiny community gardens produce fresh vegetables for dozens

of families. Neighborhoods practice mutual aid. Cooperatives and other employee-owned businesses send profits to workers and show new ways for us to control our work lives. People's possibilities don't need to be confined by artificial boundaries. Scarcity is both an illusion created to divide us and keep us down, and an argument designed to keep us from questioning existing priorities. Having the U.S. spend more on the military than the next 10 countries combined does not represent the only possibility for using roughly a trillion dollars, for example.

## STORY EXAMPLES



1. [The story of the founding of Southern Solidarity](#), and how mutual aid organizations are helping communities.

2. [Arundhati Roy](#) uses an abundance mindset to show how the pandemic is a time to imagine a new world.

3. Immigrant women in Durham, NC, challenged an exploitative industry by starting a worker-owned, cooperatively managed cleaning company, [Tangerine Clean](#). They became their own bosses and survived the pandemic with their livelihood intact.

More examples can be found at: [bit.ly/storytellersexamples](https://bit.ly/storytellersexamples)

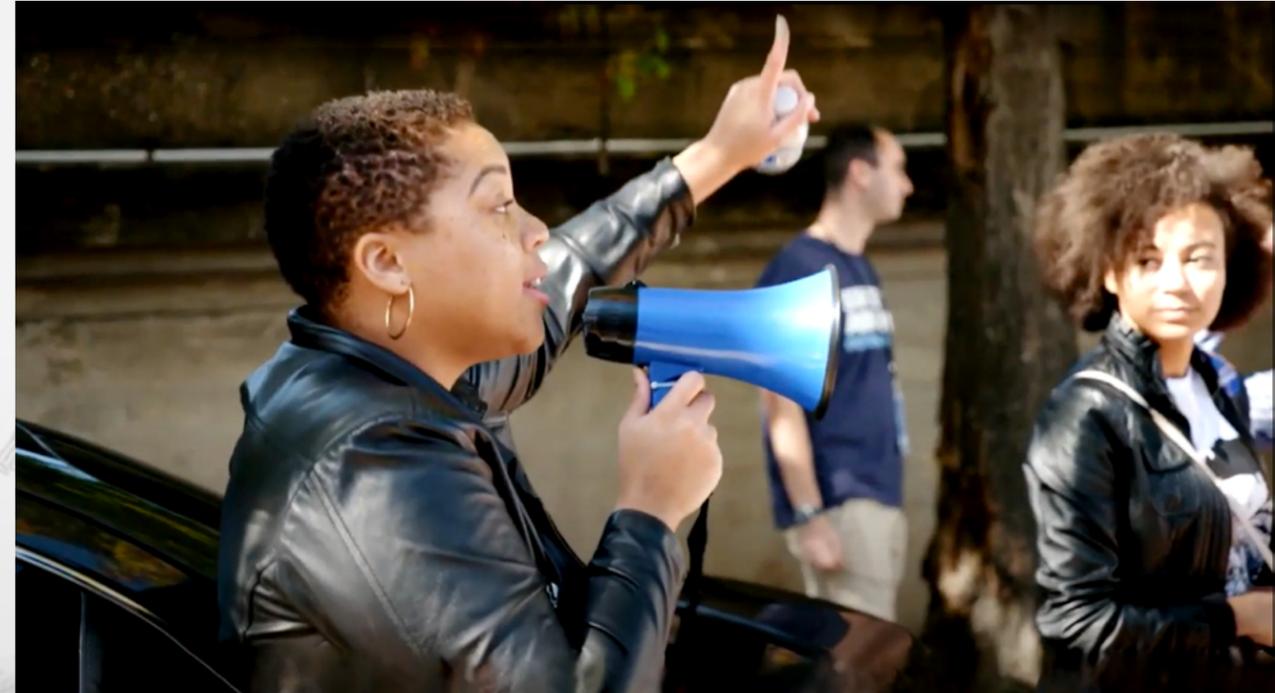
# We lead by caring about each other.

IDEAS

## Stories of people leading the way.

The best people to decide how change should be made in a community are the people of that community, acting collaboratively. We, the people, are the best leaders for our neighborhoods; our towns, villages and cities; our states and our country. We care about each other. We care for each other—and for our kids, grandkids, and elders. We know what we need. Culture is always ahead of politics because the people are always ahead of the politicians.

This is how the civil rights laws were passed, women won the vote, same-sex marriage became a reality, how police violence is now being addressed and so much more. There are many, many stories of the people leading the way at all levels of civic engagement.



1. **“And She Could Be Next,”** a two-part special on POV that features a dynamic slate of history-makers women who ran for office in 2018.
2. **Oxnard, CA, residents celebrate** a hard-won victory over pollution and one of America’s largest energy companies.

More examples can be found at: [bit.ly/storytellersexamples](https://bit.ly/storytellersexamples)



STORY THREADS

# We deserve joy.

IDEAS

### Stories of joy.

While the forces we fight against are grim, we feel joy in working together for the good of all. For the people engaged in this work, it is about making happier, healthier and better lives for themselves, their families, friends and neighbors and, ultimately, for everyone. The joys of life are unlimited: the joy of belonging, of expressing your own identity, creating your own art, making a family, and on and on.

STORY EXAMPLES

1. [A wrap-up of black joy tweets or Black Lives Matter's Juneteenth Celebration.](#)

More examples can be found at: [bit.ly/storytellersexamples](https://bit.ly/storytellersexamples)



2. [Americans are HOWLING every night](#) as a release from self-isolation and to show support for health workers amid coronavirus pandemic.



STORY THREADS

# We all belong.

IDEAS

## Stories of our common mission.

Stories of the human desire for belonging. Stories of allies and connections that defy barriers. These stories show government and community are the structures we build to unite us and do for each other what none can do on our own — ensuring equal treatment and opportunity; protecting us all from physical and economic harm; sustaining us and our planet. These are stories of making our country a home where human differences are seen and equally valued, where everyone is safe and sustained.

In these stories, we can enlarge on a tectonic, story-driven shift in culture that has transformed the notion of “hero” from a straight, white male operating solo — like Superman or Batman — to a diverse team of of less-super, more-everyday heroes, like Black Panther, Guardians of the Galaxy, or, in real life, Black Lives Matter or the U.S. Women’s National Soccer team, or even K-pop stans on Tik Tok.

STORY EXAMPLES



1. [East Lost High](#), a show that tells the story of a group of LA students struggling to belong through multiple platforms (TV, social media and beyond).
2. [Sesame Street’s Abby Cadabby](#) shares a story about how her fellow Sesame Street friend Big Bird was a victim of prejudice, and how she stood up for him.

More examples can be found at: [bit.ly/storytellersexamples](https://bit.ly/storytellersexamples)



# Curiosity is the path to our best future.

## Stories of curiosity and the future.

Stories narrating how child-like curiosity about each other, our society and the universe is the portal to understanding and unity. Stories that question the fundamental assumptions in the systems that control us. Stories that celebrate seeking an understanding of other generations, cultures and beliefs. More stories: Of people crossing cultural and racial lines to find out about each other and forge bonds across all varieties of human difference; people asking fundamental questions, like “What kind of world do

we want our children to grow up in?” and “Why not abolish the police?” and “Why do we tolerate capitalism when it generates need and poverty in the world’s richest country?” and “How do we sustain human happiness forever?” and “What if we invested in collective care?” and “Why does our culture try to confine all people into just two genders?” And so on... As James Baldwin wrote, “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers.”

1. **“Being in History”** is a photography project that imagines and celebrates “a power that is Black and queer... that is communal... that nurtures beauty and knowledge.”



Fatima Jamal, photo by Camila Falquez



3. **Taste the Nation** Padma Lakshmi’s new TV show, breaks bread with Americans across the nation revealing stories that challenge notions of identity, belonging, and what it means to be American.

More examples can be found at: [bit.ly/storytellersexamples](https://bit.ly/storytellersexamples)

2. **The We the Future** campaign showcases ten young leaders representing ten diverse movements, each already building us a better world.



# How Stories Power Change

Culture Surge is a women-of-color led coalition of storytellers, artists, organizers and researchers bringing together all that we know about stories that change the world in order to support critical storytelling for this moment. We know that to persuade people of their power, to activate people for social change, stories are essential.

Culture Surge's work is based on a synthesis of several large-scale, multi-disciplinary research projects around stories that have led to massive societal change. It's directly informed by successful examples and evidence from social justice organizations, academics across many disciplines, research institutions, cultural analysts, creators and political practitioners

over some 15 years. The diverse work on which this Guide is based share remarkably similar and mutually reinforcing results. The findings concur that the most persuasive and effective communications to sustain social change are stories that show:

- People can and do imagine a better world for themselves and others; and
- People, collectively, have the power to make changes in their own communities and globally that represent progress toward better lives and their imagined future.

These stories of transformation also show remarkable convergence around the kind of world people want and are willing to work for. It is one of inclusion, plenty, equity, and joy.

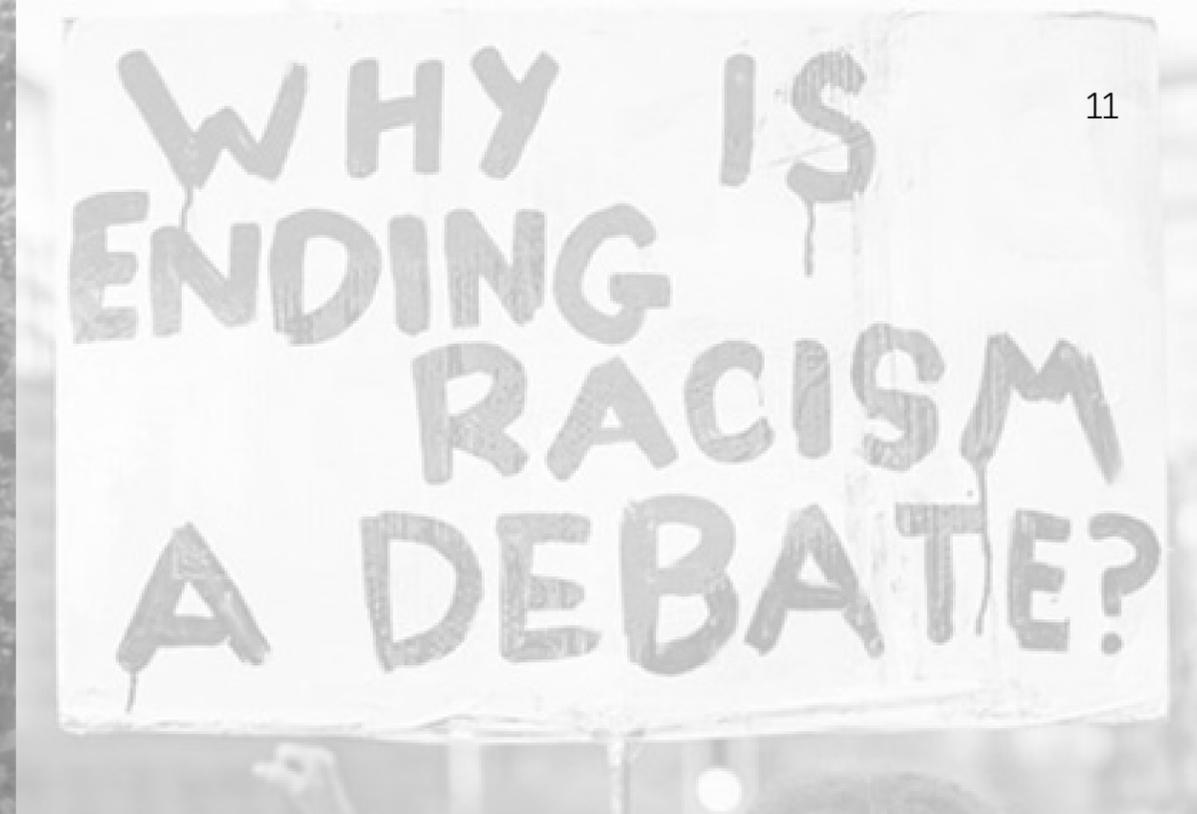
The four projects that in large part formed the basis of the Culture Surge core story are:

**Story at Scale (2020)** — A year-long, national collaboration of researchers, data scientists, artists, advocates, and organizers to develop and test a new cultural strategy to advance gender justice. This work was backed by the Culture Change Fund, a consortium of national and regional foundations housed at the Women's Foundation of California.

The project produced a ["story platform"](#) and a new understanding of audiences in America based on their differing feelings around gender.

### **Becoming America (2020)**

— A narrative project of The Pop Culture Collaborative, which they describe as "a grantmaking initiative that invests in pop culture for social change content and leadership that can build deep yearning among a true majority of Americans to co-create a pluralist nation where everyone belongs, inherently, and is treated as such." Founded by a network of philanthropic leaders—primarily women of color— led by Unbound Philanthropy, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and the Ford Foundation.



### **Midwest Culture Lab (2018)**

— An experiment to increase and deepen civic engagement among youth, particularly youth of color, by integrating cultural organizing and story-driven content strategy with grassroots, youth-led organizing.

### **How to Talk About Government (2006)**

— A two-year-long project to find narrative frames “to help renew the commitment by Americans to government’s essential role in achieving the common goals of our society.” Conducted by the FrameWorks Institute, partnered with Demos and the Council for Excellence in Government.

FrameWorks points out that government is not politics and we can (and probably should) support the necessary role of good government even when the political environment is toxic.

We also drew valuable lessons from two works released by Demos: the [Race-Class Narrative Project](#), (2018), and [Our Story: A Populist Meta-Narrative for This Moment](#), (2019).

### **SELECTED FURTHER READING:**

[Story at Scale](#) (2020)

[Becoming America](#) (2020)

[Midwest Culture Lab](#), Alliance for Youth Organizing (2018)

[How to Talk About Government](#) PDF, FrameWorks (2006)

Abstract of [“The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments.”](#) By Joshua Kalla & David E. Broockman (2018). *American Political Science Review*, 112(1), 148-166. doi:10.1017/S0003055417000363

[Center for Cultural Power Covid-19 Narrative Guide](#) (2020)

[The Race-Class Narrative Project](#) Demos (2018)

[Messaging This Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators](#) by Anat Shenker-Osorio (2017)

[Marketing Malpractice](#) by James Forr, Olson Zaltman

[How To Stop Mismeasuring the People](#) by Kirk Cheyfitz, Political Narrative

[Our Story](#) Demos (2019)