

# Storytelling for a regenerative culture

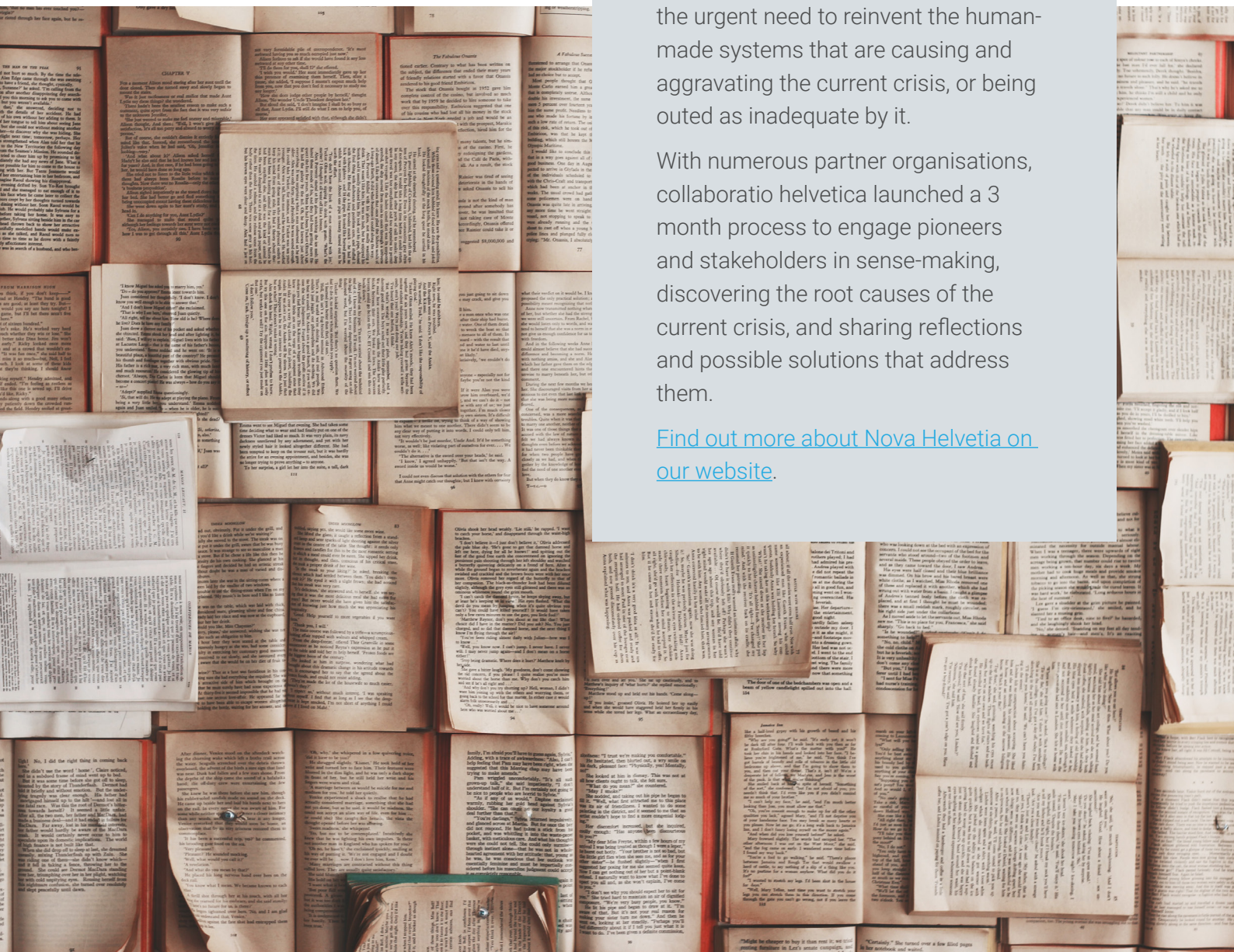
Reflection paper of the Nova Helvetia working group on Storytelling (SDG 17)

## About Nova Helvetia

Nova Helvetia is a process to address the urgent need to reinvent the human-made systems that are causing and aggravating the current crisis, or being outed as inadequate by it.

With numerous partner organisations, collaboratio helvetica launched a 3 month process to engage pioneers and stakeholders in sense-making, discovering the root causes of the current crisis, and sharing reflections and possible solutions that address them.

[Find out more about Nova Helvetia on our website.](#)



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## In a nutshell

**The working group ‘Storytelling for a regenerative future’ explores a means to inspire each other, to engage and to activate the collective potential for a regenerative culture.**

Stories build bridges that have the potential to overcome the root causes of disconnection from ourselves, each other and nature and help to reconnect for the benefits of all. We feel that reconnection has to start from a place of an open and curious heart, listening to people outside of our own bubble. By providing space for sharing, careful listening and harvesting the essence of underlying stories, we will eventually activate the collective potential for shifting towards a regenerative culture.

The importance of storytelling in the Nova Helvetia journey resulted from the experiences and reflections of the Swiss climate change movements during 2019. In Nova Helvetia, we embarked on our own ‘U’ journey and found that it mirrored the challenges we see on a larger scale in society, with regard to internal as well as external communication, the team capacity for sense-making and the alignment during our group’s process. We used practices such as dialogue, journaling and systemic constellation in order to frame and refine our calling question and the focus of our group to crystallise our core insights and reflections.

## Context and main question

The basic assumption is that our systems and societal structures are based on shared stories and paradigms – even though most of the time we are not aware of it<sup>1</sup>. For example: the way our political and economic institutions work is based on cultural and social agreements (such as the value of money, for e.g.). In this sense, in order for systemic change towards a more regenerative future to happen, the underlying stories must also shift – as well as the values that are transmitted through them made more explicit.

Storytelling was defined as one of the key issues in the Nova Helvetia journey. The impulse for a working group on Storytelling (for a regenerative culture) came from a conversation about how to

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Yuval Noah Harai (2018). [Sapiens - A Brief History of Humankind](#).

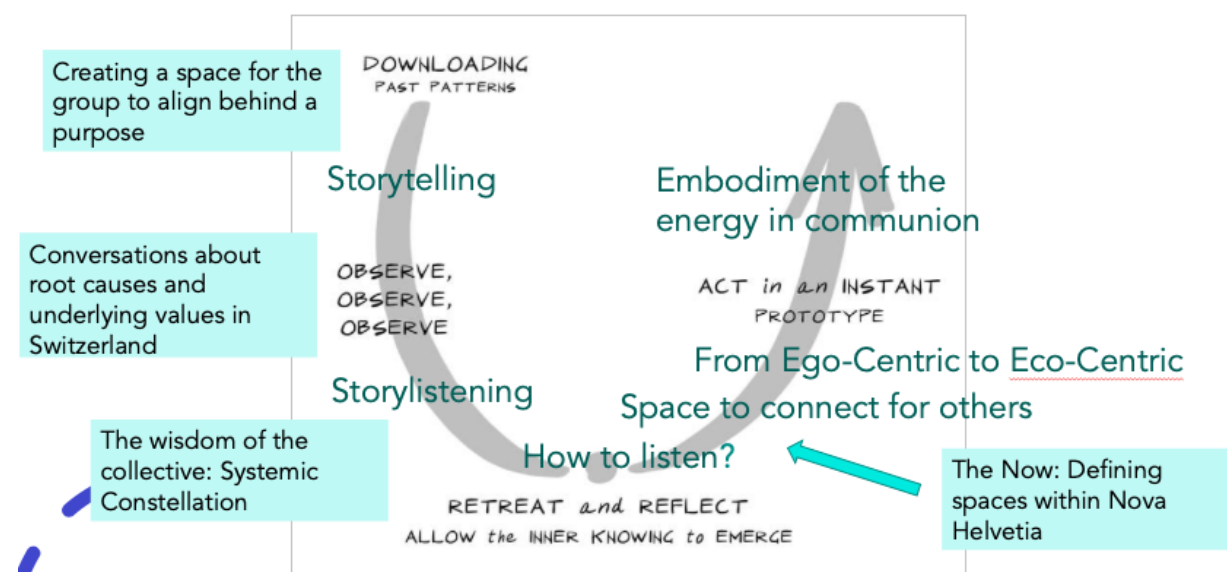
effectively communicate the need for systemic changes in society, in order to move towards a more sustainable, just and humane togetherness in the near future. The urgency of the topic comes from Swiss (and global) climate change movements, which, after a year of intense work with direct action on the streets and a lot of communication initiatives, came to the conclusion that a change in the approach of actions and a focus shift in a different direction and level are needed. The movement is looking for a new narrative that would talk about climate change in a different way. It yearns for a shift towards true but positive storytelling within an overall approach towards reconnection and not based on the old 'Us against the Others' narrative of separation. The network of Swiss climate change movements initiated the working group 'Positive Storytelling for Climate', which inspired the formation of this working group 'Positive Storytelling for a Regenerative Culture' within the Nova Helvetia journey with people involved in different sectors.

### Calling question

The group has been refining the question as a focus of its exploration. This is the final version: **What makes our hearts sing - How can we inspire each other to engage with our future and to activate the collective potential?**

Based on this question, we intend to find ways to tell a story about transition to a more regenerative future, in a way that is engaging and can resonate with the wider public.

## Reflections along the "U"



### 1. Phase: Co-Initiating – Storytelling

The group embarked on a journey of dialogues, in order to find and frame the calling question. In this phase the group got input from the CCS (Coordination Climate Suisse) Working Group Positive Storytelling for Climate, which was founded in April 2020 at a national exchange meeting of Swiss climate change movements. This group is supported by international storytelling experts from the [Gaia Storytelling Lab](https://www.gaia-storytelling.com/) of the European Institute for Governance in Berlin, especially its head, Prof. [David Boje](https://www.truestorytelling.blog/).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> True Storytelling blog by David Boje: <https://truestorytelling.blog/>

We reflected on questions such as:

- What narratives do we need now? What narratives are people still stuck with?
- What do we have to change, let go, frame differently?
- How can we live and embody these stories?
- How can we balance our energy as so many opportunities, ideas, projects arise?

In our dialogues around storytelling we looked at it as a method of systemic thinking, interconnection and explored dependency patterns. The notion of 'listening first' arose, as we sensed that individual stories contained grains of the underlying systemic truth, that can be used to build common ground narratives. We were searching for a down to earth theory-free idea of systems thinking and were prompted to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>3</sup>

How can we as individuals and as a group express our essence and share a coherent and aligned message beyond individual group differences? How can we inspire people to engage with a larger vision? As part of the current paradigm we are living in, our societies are strongly rooted in competition, fear and the importance of status. We came to the conclusion that we would have to develop the capacity to face pain and fear in a different way, in order to allow for a larger narrative and a shift in values to manifest themselves.

## 2. Phase: Observing – Story Listening

**Emerging topic: To listen to each other with openness and humbleness: What's already there instead of what is the story we want to share.**

- What stories are already in the space?
- What are the stories that we as individuals are holding at the moment?
- What is the story I am living?
- What do I think about the current situation and what is needed?

With the death of George Floyd and the social uprising around 'Black lives matter' in the US and in other countries, the group started a dialogue about root causes and blind spots:

- How do we address root causes of the societal challenges we are seeing, instead of just fighting the symptoms?
- We should know what they are, see them, acknowledge them, in order to create healthy solutions.
- What is emerging out of this acknowledgment? As a group we became aware of levels of collective trauma, grief and of systemic complexity.
- We are all products of conditioning. Where do we ourselves behave in a way that is racist or excluding others? What are our own and collective blind spots of white supremacy?

In order to move beyond the calling question to possible outcomes and prototypes, we explored the Swiss context of storytelling: What is the usual narrative in Switzerland in a (global) crisis?

What would a new story be like? One, that is not based on the '/we and the Others' - Othering-narrative? We felt that we needed to look at the unconscious root cause and structures inside of ourselves first before talking about the interconnectedness of it all. The idea of separation is deeply

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<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh: [Liebesbrief an die Erde](#)

rooted in ourselves as individuals, as a culture, and as a nation. What is our inner story of fear, loss and separation?

The new stories we want to tell should be touching, emotional – from happy, hopeful to sad to fearful, but true, so that people feel understood and can connect to the underlying vision on a deeper level. We dared to ask why so many people in Switzerland live in a state of chronic anxiety. We argued that success, justice, safety, boundaries and freedom are core Swiss beliefs. We then found that exploring these beliefs, to open a dialogue about their current framing and meaning might help. We came to the conclusion that currently many of those beliefs are being collectively interpreted in a way that contributes to making us ill (success, justice, safety) and contribute actively to the destruction of all forms of life, especially our habitat, nature.

### **3. Phase: Sensing – How to listen**

The group experienced its very own 'stuck at this point', feeling overwhelmed by all the questions, the complexity of the topic, differing focuses and a vague sense of not being fully aligned behind the calling question. We stayed with the calling question and focused on story listening and harvesting as the first step towards a possible outcome. We felt, we should talk with people outside of our own bubble about:

- Values and beliefs
- Disconnection / reconnection
- Why do we fear/ resist change?

We recognized that we need to frame our questions in a way that encourages people to open up and share, going to a deeper level of speaking about fears, needs, values, hopes and dreams.

We felt we need to be able to listen without judgement, being open to other realities, to mindsets and values that have served people over time.

Having a closer look at the root causes of many of the symptoms we see at the surface, we sense the overall disconnection (from self, others and nature<sup>4</sup>) to be the root cause of everything we see on the surface. In order to create conditions for reconnection, we need to reframe certain values.

Our ideas of possible outcomes shifted to:

- Harvesting stories
- Hosting a dialogue on values and beliefs
- Designing an innovative campaign to reach people outside of our bubble
- Working with systemic constellation

With regard to the purpose of the group and next steps to take we decided to work with Systemic Constellation as a method. This allowed the group to find access to the collective intelligence in the field without the limitations of cognitive perception.

Systemic Constellation allowed the group to recognize the importance of qualities such as connectedness and being in actual relationships with each other. This shed a new light on the purpose of the group: Whereas the focus had been to gather stories and re-engineer a narrative, the purpose shifted towards enabling the groups within Nova Helvetia to tell stories to each other by creating formats of communion that allow togetherness. This communion would allow our members

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4 As described by Otto Scharmer in Theory U, see for example "[The Essentials of Theory U](#)".

to deepen a sense of belonging and safety, and to engage with storytelling from a regenerative place. We felt that enjoying this 'yin' quality is key to deal with the present complexity.

#### 4. Phase: Crystallising – Providing Spaces to connect to each other

This is the phase of our 'U' journey where we find ourselves in, at the present moment. We are about to crystallise our next steps and define a prototype we want to test and implement, while at the same time manifesting the 'yin' energy needed for communion and reconnection in order to strengthen our own regenerative circle and open up safe spaces for story listening and harvesting.

##### Where we are at present, mid-July 2020:

- We came to the conclusion that being in a community is quite fundamental for a regenerative life. How can we offer a space to all the Nova Helvetia working groups that helps us to connect and brings us together on a deeper level and expose the underlying beliefs across sectors, topics and regions?
- We want to offer many paths, so that people of all ages can explore and be drawn towards a different and enlivening narrative.
- Many layers of narratives and paths are needed to connect to different contexts and to make new narratives as co-created and accessible as possible.
- The focus of our further action as a group is on practising embodiment of the new narrative, in order to be able to live and act from this place together.
- Living in and becoming the story allows us to communicate from this energy plane with openness, empathy and curiosity.
- A potential prototype could be to host and offer spaces that encourage connection and alignment. It's all about storytelling, reshaping and reframing them to enable us as humans to reconnect to ourselves, to each other and to nature. We want to facilitate reconnection and alignment.

#### 5. Phase: Prototyping – Embodying the energy in communion

Even though clear prototypes, projects and plans have not yet been discussed or are visible, we know that we need a safe space to manifest the energy plane we need for this storytelling initiative to succeed. Also, throughout our journey various concrete formats of outcomes bubbled up to the surface:

- Hosting a dialogue event with story sharing
- Making a radio broadcast or recording a song
- A more scientific look at underlying cognitive issues that make a story appealing

##### Where we go from here:

- **Crystallising:** In the process of further crystallisation of new ideas, we want to create space for dialogue around storytelling and common values.
- **Prototyping:**
  - Further ideas and visions for story-sharing and story-listening projects
  - Initiatives that foster reconnection

- Explore whether there is anything that we as a working group can offer as an initiative across topics for all Nova Helvetia working groups.

## Vision of the future: An ante-narrative of change

*“It is 2040, the year the last nuclear power plant is going to be shut down for good. Climate change is still happening and posing a high risk to the survival of humankind on earth. Yet, the global CO2-levels have finally started to decrease significantly for the first time. Within the last 20 years we as human beings on earth have experienced the most fundamental transition humankind has ever embarked on in their entire history. How we live and work together, has changed completely towards global justice and equality, moderation and connectedness.*

*Humankind has realised, that the root causes of disconnection from ourselves and each other as well as the alienation from nature had over centuries caused a toxic, destructive development of global social injustice, exploitation of people, animals and natural resources, murder and devastation such as wars, slavery, racism and segregation leading to systemic trauma and grief passed on from generation to generation.*

*The natural resources of the planet have been exploited, climate change was killing people or driving them from their homes. Many millions had become climate change refugees. In 2020 a global health crisis, known as the COVID-19 pandemic, later called the Great Realisation by most, put life as we knew it on hold for many months and made humankind realise how dangerously close they had come to their own destruction. Based on this realisation, over the following five years a huge shift in values and attitudes had led to the unseating of most conservative governments, the implementation of sociocratic structures and a total stop of the use of fossil fuels, to name but a few of the fundamental shifts. The development of new power storage and transmission technologies as well as a global basic income scheme – reducing working time and spending – had dramatically brought down the consumption of energy, especially in high income areas of the world. With the focus shifting from globalisation back to regional socio-economic networks, the pandemics raging in the world from 2019 to 2028 could be contained.*

*The transition almost came to a violent halt in late 2029, when security forces of the old political system tried to overthrow the combined climate, transition and spiritual forces on earth. At the brink of a global civil war, elders, political, religious and spiritual leaders worldwide joined ranks in order to lead the mostly peaceful transformation as the World Council of Change.*

*In 2032, the rights of all living beings to be recognised and treated as sacred were written in the Global Charta for the Protection of Life on Earth.*

*Even though the level of spending, financial wealth and the overall sense of security decreased temporarily, predominantly in the developed world, the overall quality of life improved as people transitioned into a different, meaningful, more connected way of living together. The huge task of guiding people in need of psychological support and counselling was taken up worldwide by a huge network of change initiatives, called “The Cafés of Hope”, applying positive psychology, grief and trauma counselling, healing, storytelling and practical neighbourhood help. The roots of this network can be traced back to a global transformation initiative, called The GAIA Journey, which took place online, in the midst of the worldwide COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.”*

## Summary

Stories build bridges that have the potential to overcome the root causes of disconnection and help us to reconnect for the benefit of all. We feel that a reconnection should start from a place of an open heart, listening to people outside of our respective contexts and bubbles. By providing space for sharing, listening and harvesting of stories, we will gradually allow a new narrative to emerge and eventually activate the collective potential for a regenerative culture. This might happen as we, ourselves, live and embody the story, which allows us to communicate from an embodied and connected place with openness, compassion and curiosity.

A prototype could be spaces that facilitate connection and alignment. In the end it might all be about sharing positive stories and reshaping old narratives/values, in order to enable us as humans to reconnect to ourselves, each other and to nature.

## A prototype to address key challenges that we found

A storylistening/harvesting initiative such as a "Future Café", moderated value debates and art interventions will encourage people from all ages and social, cultural and religious backgrounds to share their change/ adaptation/ climate stories openly.

## Further literature and resources

David Boje (2017). [Boje's 'How to do storytelling interviewing' video for Professor Al Arkoubi Khadija](#). Youtube Video.

Otto C. Scharmer & Katrin Kaufer (2018). [The Essentials of Theory U](#).

Ranjan Datta (2017). [Traditional storytelling: an effective Indigenous research methodology and its implications for environmental research](#). Alternative - an international journal of indigenous people.

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## Co-Authors



**Netty Fabian**

Klimabewegung Basel/Health4Future  
[nettyfabian@hotmail.com](mailto:nettyfabian@hotmail.com)



**Donatus Grütter**

Shift to Clarity  
[donatus@shift-to-clarity.com](mailto:donatus@shift-to-clarity.com)



**Martin Hohn**

Zurich Retreat  
[martin@zurichretreat.com](mailto:martin@zurichretreat.com)



**Sarah Friederich**

collaboratio helvetica  
[sarah.friederich@collaboratio.ch](mailto:sarah.friederich@collaboratio.ch)



**Luea Ritter**

collaboratio helvetica  
[luea.ritter@collaboratio.ch](mailto:luea.ritter@collaboratio.ch)



**Marie José d'Aprile**

[mjdaprile@hotmail.com](mailto:mjdaprile@hotmail.com)



**Heike Wegener**

Seelenkraft berühren / Pioneers for Peace  
[heike.wegener@posteo.de](mailto:heike.wegener@posteo.de)