

Collective Story Harvesting

Storytelling is one of the most powerful knowledge management tools of the Art of Hosting community. Contained in our stories is both the experience and learning that will grow our capacities to use the Art of Hosting practice in ever more complex spaces. As the depth and scale of our work increases, our practice stories offer us guideposts for innovation, process development and how to create robust containers for conversations that really matter.

During August and September 2010 we began to experiment in Art of Hosting trainings with combining storytelling and harvesting to build our capacity in both these mediums; we were *hosting the harvest*. Collective harvesting enables us to track many arcs of a single story simultaneously, meaning we can practice targeted listening and group learning, while offering a gift to the story holders, as well as the group as a whole in the form of collective meaning making. Group harvesting is an ideal way to surface the many insights, innovations and a-ha's that exist beneath the surface of our stories and to take learning around our practice to a deeper level.

How does collective harvesting of practice stories work?

First, you need a good story about a change process that was run using Art of Hosting principles and practice – ideally one that has enough complexity, scale and duration to make it interesting. In our Art of Hosting community, we have the stories of the European Commission, healthcare projects in Columbus, Ohio and Nova Scotia, the UK FinanceLab and Annecto in Melbourne, Australia as some key examples of this type of story, but any systemic story will do.



Group harvest in action

It is best to have those directly connected to the story on hand to tell it, and it can be more interesting to hear from more than one person involved in the story. More voices add depth and richness, as well as a variety of points of view.

The story does not need to be an often-told one, or polished in any form. In fact, this process can be used to help polish a story and give the storytellers input on how to focus and refine the story to be told to different audiences.

We've found that group harvesting takes time – at least 90 minutes is the minimum time needed. If you are working with a group of harvesters during a training, or with people who haven't done this type of process before, then keeping the storytelling to around 30 minutes is advisable, otherwise it is easy for listeners to become overloaded. If you are working with a practice team or your purpose is to create maximum learning around

a story, then you may want to work on the interplay between story, harvest and learning for a half day, a day or even longer.

Preparing for collective harvesting:

First check with your storytellers and make them an invitation. Stories respond to invitation and when a heartfelt invitation is present, often a story will come out in a whole new way and offer new learning to those telling it. A group harvest is a gift to those telling *and* those harvesting, and should be offered as such.

Next, decide on the arcs you would like to harvest. Ideally this could be agreed with the storyholders and the listeners, depending on where they want to focus their learning. As in any Art of Hosting process, you are planning for the harvest. Take as much time as you need to discuss exactly what you want to get out of this process and what will happen to the harvest afterwards. You'll need at least one person harvesting each arch you've chosen and more than one can harvest the same arch simultaneously. Here are some to choose from:

- **Narrative Arc***: The thread of the story – people, events, stages. You might also harvest facts, emotions and values that are part of the story, etc.
- **Process Arc***: What interventions, processes, applications, discoveries happened?
- **Pivotal Points***: When did breakthroughs occur, what did we learn?
- **Application**: What can we learn from this story for application in our own or other systems?
- **Taking Change to Scale**: What can we learn from this story about taking change to scale?
- **Questions**: What questions arise from this story that we could ask of any system?
- **Synchronicity & Magic**: What happened during this story that pointed to synchronicity and the magic in the middle?
- **Specific theme**: Harvest the story using a specific theme, like collaborative leadership, the art of participation, etc, and see what it tells you
- **Art of Hosting pattern arc**: *The 6 Breaths*: Where did each breath occur during the story? *The 5th organisational paradigm*: Where did new forms of governance and working occur? *Core team/calling team*: What did we learn about holding the centre of this work? There may be others as well.
- **Principles**: What principles of working can be gleaned from this story? What did we learn about participatory practices? What principles of complex living systems were reflected in this work?
- **The StoryField***: How did the field of the system's story change? Can you name the story or metaphor the system started with and what it moved to?



Narrative Arc



The 6 Breaths

We are suggesting that the arcs marked with * might be foundational to any harvesting process.

If you have other talents in your group around graphic facilitation/visuals, poetry, music, mindmapping, art, etc. you may also want to invite a harvest in this form. Each of these will add a greater richness, diversity and enjoyment to the harvest.

Suggested process:

Framing & Introduction: Welcome people to the session. Make the invitation publically to the storytellers. Explain the arcs and ask for volunteers.

Storytelling: Ask the storytellers to tell the story and the group to harvest. Be clear about the time allocated for the storytelling.



Pivotal Points



Questions

Collective harvest: Give the storytellers materials to do their harvest of the harvest. Ask each of the harvesters to report in on what they found. Take at least as long for this as for the storytelling. Each of the harvests will have more depth than can be told during a first round. It might be helpful to have more than one round of harvest, or for the rest of the group to question each harvester to draw out additional insights.

Response from the tellers: What were the gifts to you from this group harvest? What are you taking away from this session?

Response from the group: What were the gifts to you from this group harvest? What are you taking away from this session?

Closing the session: Thank you to the storytellers and the harvesters. Any final remarks about what will happen to the harvest now that it has been heard. Is there enough here to return to it again and see what else surfaces? Do you want to come back as a group and hear the next version of the story?

Materials and set-up:

Ideally create a large circle with tellers as part of the circle. You may need some small tables for those harvesting onto flipchart, or they may be fine harvesting onto the floor. You'll need plenty of coloured pens and other art supplies may also be helpful.

You may want to have recording equipment on hand if you'd like to video the story and the results. It's also helpful to photograph graphic harvest.

What else can be done with a collective harvest?

For the StoryHolders

Collective harvesting is an ideal input both for taking stock of the learning so far in a project and for polishing a story so that it can be told to another audience. Having external ears listen to your story can help to surface things you haven't seen or haven't taken notice of during the time you were living in the experience. Often an experience is so complex and moves forward with such speed that it is almost impossible to see how it all fits together from the inside.

We suggest using a collective harvest to take stock at regular intervals during a project's life. Being well witnessed can be both a blessing and a relief to people who've done the hard yards holding the space for something to happen. Good witnessing enables insights about the key pivotal points in a story to surface, as well as helping other emotions to be heard and released. Deep listening can help a story to identify its protagonists' strengths and gifts, as well as the supports and barriers they faced in contributing those gifts. It can also support a story to rise above the personal to reveal insights about the local context it happened in and even the wider systemic context.

Just as external eyes can help us see something we know well in a new light, external listeners can help story participants to see their own experiences in a new light, often revealing what has not been seen from inside the story. Even such a simple thing as naming what has not been named before adds immensely to the learning.

If you have harvesters who are expert in body-based knowing or intuition systems, such as constellation work, these can also add a rich understanding to the harvest. Those who are story or narrative practitioners can add a reflection using mythology, metaphor and other story forms.

Specific feedback can also help a team to know what to focus on in polishing their story. Often there are so many details held by the team, that a listener can be overwhelmed. Harvesting can help to bring what's important into sharp relief, supporting a story to become more focused and more potent.



Graphic harvesting

For the Listeners and Harvesters

If storytelling is a skill that is both inherent to humans and one that can be polished with practice, then so is listening. Listening is the companion skill to storytelling, indeed the story arises in the space between the teller and the listener. In essence, a story *needs* a listener to become what it can be. We don't often get the opportunity to listen well, especially with a specific purpose, and to provide a necessary feedback loop to those within a committed project. Group story harvesting can provide such a practice and feedback loop, strengthening the community around a project shared in this way.

Harvesting is also a skill that needs practice, and it is important to experience the wide variety of ways a story or an experience can be harvested, each bringing its own richness, much as another facet brings sparkle to a gemstone. Purposeful harvesting is both a good experience and an excellent way to practice. Story listeners and harvesters may want to debrief afterwards on their experience, surfacing their challenges and learning as a way for the group to become more skilful in the future.

Beyond – for the AoH community and wider

Harvests of projects that have gone to scale, as well as those that have faced many challenges, are a valuable contribution to the wider AoH community and beyond, helping us to increase the learning within our network. Sharing practice stories is one of the quickest ways for the principles and practices of AoH to be understood and integrated. Please share your collective story harvests on the AoH Ning site.



Music harvest

The strengths of Collective Story Harvesting

- It can deal with complex realities and bring simplicity as well as surface understanding and learning from complexity.
- It is a harvesting of current reality – how we got to where we are now?
- It creates a rich learning field.
- It creates a strong connection and shared understanding between those involved in the process.
- It is a gift to the storytellers and others, with lots of resonant learning happening.
- It is a simple, but powerful tool that can be used regularly to take stock, capture learning and refocus the field.

Contributed by Mary Alice Arthur, Monica Nissén & Ria Baeck, October 2010

Applying Collective Story Harvesting

There are many ways to apply collective story harvesting:

- **Systemic story harvest for applied learning:** *A group focuses on one systemic story to harvest the learnings and apply them to its own work. As in the process described above, a systemic story is told, the group harvests arcs and discusses the learnings. This works equally well for a practice group coming together or a working team hearing a story from another organisation or system and then applying the learnings to its own practice.*

- **Full system team building/strategy session:** *Harvesting an organisation or group's own story for learning, teambuilding and strategic enhancement.* Working with the story in this way brings the group into a collective field of meaning. Vision or mission statements can be enhanced and integrated, strategic plans can be invigorated. See the case study below for the step-by-step process.
- **Many stories/collective learning:** *Harvesting a variety of stories simultaneously in small groups, then converging the learning across the full group.* A variety of stories are selected that offer different aspects to the group. Participants attend and harvest the story that most interests them. Collective meta learning is harvested by the full group. The suggested process follows.
- **Creating a new field of work or practice:** *Telling the story of the wider context up to now in order to set the scene for the new work or practice field to arise and find its potent focus.* This process might also be used for systemic evaluation.

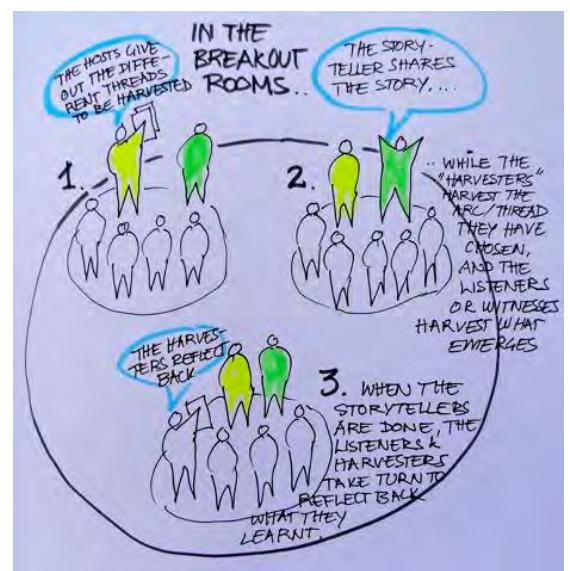
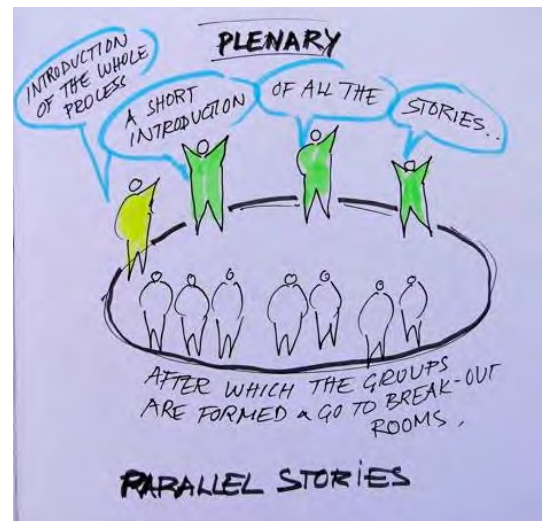
Suggested process for Many stories/Collective learning:

Before the session: *Select appropriate stories and ask the storytellers to prepare. It may be you want to provide a number of different stories, with various scales or a variety of elements. The key criteria is that the story must have a breakthrough point or learning within it, although it does not need to be a success story. Please note that it you will hear a very different story when you ask a caller to tell it, then when someone who was involved tells it.*

Framing & Introduction (15 – 20 minutes):

Welcome people to the session, framing the context of hosting the harvest. Make the invitation publically to the storytellers and ask each teller to give a brief synopsis of their story. Ask participants to cluster around the story they are interested in working with.

Storytelling (30 minutes): *If you are working with a harvesting team who can be pre-briefed, you may wish to have them act as facilitator for the story groups. They can invite the story again at the start of this round. Explain the arcs and ask for volunteers within the groups. Explain also the role of witness, or pure listener and how important this is to the process. Witnesses will be contributing to the meta-harvest in the small groups and the next stage. Ask the storytellers to tell the story and the group to harvest. Be clear about the time allocated for the storytelling.*



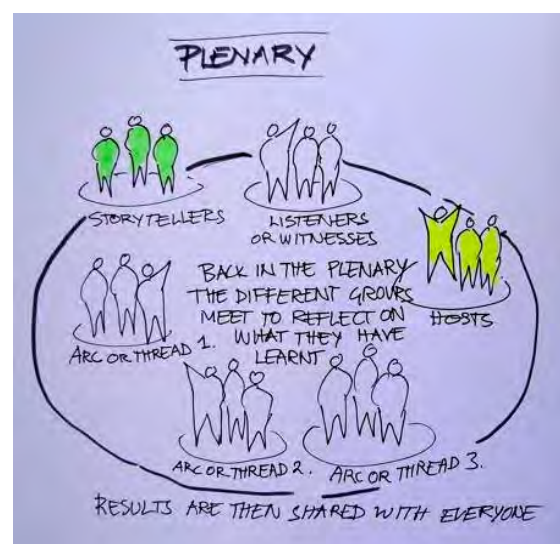
Small group harvesting (30 – 50 min): Allow the harvesters to ask any clarifying questions. Ask each of the harvesters to report in on what they found and the storytellers to harvest their insights as a result. Take at least as long for this as for the storytelling.

Break (20 minutes)

Collective harvest (45 – 60 minutes): Come back into the full group. Ask like arc harvesters to sit together in small groups (i.e. people who harvested “Pivotal Points” sit together, Witnesses sit together, etc). Focus the group on a meta harvest question, for example: “What are the conditions for participatory leadership to be successfully introduced in our context?”. Groups then debrief what they have harvested in the context of the full group question. Allow plenty of time to harvest this harvest.

Additional response from the group: What were the gifts to you from this collective harvest? What are you taking away from this session?

Closing the session: Thank you to the storytellers and the harvesters. Any final remarks about what will happen to the harvest now that it has been heard



Contributed by Mary Alice Arthur, Monica Nissén & Toke Paludan Møller, April 2011

Case Study: Collective Story Harvesting across a practice field

- **Event:** Authentic Leadership In Action (ALIA) Summer Institute, 30 June 2011, Columbus, Ohio, USA
- **Facilitators:** Monica Nissén & Mary Alice Arthur

This case study shows how collective story harvesting methodology can be used to support collective meaning making across a practice field. General applications are noted in blue.

The **ALIA Summer Institute** has been offered for the past 10 years, and has travelled from its base in Nova Scotia to Europe and most recently to Columbus, Ohio. The five day event in 2011 included a two day “Innovation Marketplace” with the objective of sharing practice and connecting the wider field of practitioners around “making change for good”. We hosted a Collective Story Harvest on the afternoon of the first day for 180 people with the intention of focusing on the lessons learned from the ALIA field of practice.

Fourteen practice stories were sourced from the field and both storytellers and hosts for each of the story groups were briefed prior to the session.



When working with a group of this size, it is important to select stories prior to the session so storytellers and hosts are well briefed and have the opportunity to meet each other. This way you can be sure that you have stories that will lend themselves well to harvesting and tellers who have had the time to organise the scope of the story they will be sharing.

The process **briefing for the storytellers** looked like this:

What is Collective Story Harvest?

A Collective Story Harvest enables us to deeply connect with and learn from the experience in our community. A number of stories will be shared, and we will break into small groups work with a set of specific “arcs” to harvest each story. Each of the participants either harvests one of the arcs or is a witness during the storytelling and then shares with the small group. Finally, we will come together to converge our learning in a café setting.

What do we want from the tellers?

We have invited 15 stories of a variety of scales and scopes to be told. We invite you to tell your story for around 20 minutes. Think back to the great stories you’ve heard – they have a beginning, middle and an end and usually have a challenge at the core of them, as well as overcoming or grappling with the challenge. The key criteria is that the story must have a breakthrough point or learning within it, although it does not need to be a success story.

That means that your story doesn’t have to be totally completed, rather that we can learn from the arc of the story, along these lines — here’s who I am, here’s who is involved, here is the challenge that faced me, here’s what happened, here’s where we are now. There may be more than one of you involved in telling this story, but please keep the group telling the story small and please work together prior to the session to decide who will hold what piece of the story.

What’s the process?

1:30 – 2:00 Introducing the process & the stories

*We will introduce the process to the full group. We’d like **a very brief synopsis from you**, so participants can choose which story they want to help harvest. We will ask you to stand together at the front of the room, ready to give your piece.*

2:10 – 3:10 Small groups – storytelling & harvesting

We will have a number of arcs to harvest for every story being told as well as witnesses in each group. There will be a host for your session who will introduce the process and the harvesting arcs in the small group. We imagine there will be at least 10 people harvesting in each group. The harvesters will work while you are telling the story, then, while they report back, we ask you to harvest and

share what you've learned in turn.

Our storytellers have told us both that they felt wonderfully held by the listeners and that they've learned something more about their own stories during the sharing. This whole part of the process will take an hour.

3:20 – 4:15 Convergence & harvesting

When we come back together, we will break into “like” groups — the storytellers will sit together, so will the witnesses and others who have harvested similar arcs across the stories, etc. During this part of the process we'll find out what we've learned across our community and harvest the nuggets.



From 3:20 Video

We'd like to capture your story! At the time you've been given, go to the Speakers Corner to have your 3 minute brief story recorded.

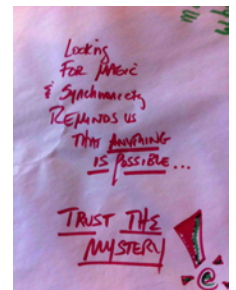
The brief for the hosts looked like this:

The prevailing question for these two days is “What have we learned about what it takes to make change for good?” Each of the harvesters will be keeping this in mind as they harvest.

A harvesting arc is like a lens to look at the story through. Each lens gives a different ability to focus our collective learning.

Harvesting arcs

- **Pivotal moments & Breakthroughs:** What are the pivotal moments or breakthrough moments in this story? What can we learn from them?
- **Synchronicity & magic:** Harvest the moments of synchronicity and magic that happened in this story. What helps us to notice and take advantage of synchronicity? What helps magic happen?
- **Resources & resourcefulness:** What can we learn from this story about the skilful finding and use of resources or about how to be resourceful from this story?
- **Relationships: working collaboratively and effectively as and with partners:** What can we learn from this story about the importance and tending of relationships and how we can work effectively as partners or step into partnership?
- **Working systemically/taking the work to scale:** What can we learn from this story about what it takes to work systemically or take work to scale?
- **Leadership:** What is the thread of leadership in this story? Where do you notice new forms or practices of leadership?
- **Listener or Witness:** Keep your focus and eye contact on the tellers, really witness them in their telling and the group in their harvesting. If any key insights occur to you to report them in the harvesting round.



What's the process?

Here are the steps:

- *Introduce the harvesting arcs, and ask people to choose. Be sure to have at least one witness.*
- *Give each harvesting group & storytellers 5 minutes to get organised with their team mates*
- *Make a formal invitation for the story to be told*
- *Story is told for up to 30 minutes, harvesters harvest*
- *Harvesters report back on what they learned; storytellers harvest*
- *Storytellers report back what they learned*
- *Tell everyone we will be doing a convergence together and each harvesting arc will sit at a café table with other who have harvested the same arc. Storytellers will also sit together.*
- *Come back to the main room for 3:20*

We created a written briefing sheet for the storytelling & hosting team. There will always be someone who doesn't hear the instructions or needs to refer to them again. This made it simple and easy. Thinking about how we could streamline the return to the full group made all the difference to this happening quickly and efficiently.



Each of the hosts were given briefing sheets for each of the harvesting arcs. These sheets were colour coordinated with the café tables we prepared once we had briefed the group, the storytellers had introduced their stories and the group departed, each participant choosing the room allocated to the story they were most interested in.

When the group returned it was easy for each harvester to find the tables allocated to their theme and sit with harvesters from the other story groups. We worked in café tables to debrief what we'd learned in the harvesting. We used these questions:

If you harvested an arc: *What did you learn through the lens of your arc that could help all of us lead change for good?*

If you were sharing or witnessing the story: *What gifts or key insights are you taking away from sharing or hearing the story?*

The harvest from the full session was deep and rich. Storytellers spoke of the insight and learning they received from harvesters in their group. Harvesters spoke of the insights they gained for their own work. Hosts spoke about the honour of holding space for deep storytelling and witnesses spoke of the deepening and insight that occurred in their group. We noticed the interconnectedness, energy and appreciation that was alive in the field at the end of the Collective Story Harvest, and noted how much deeper we could have gone in uncovering practice and principles had we had the time to continue to unpack our collective learning.



We had three hours for the Collective Story Harvest at ALIA. It could easily have been given the full afternoon to enable each participant to integrate their insights into their own practice action planning. If this type of activity happened at the beginning of an event, the threads of the harvest could continue to be unpacked and deepened during the entire event.

Contributed by Mary Alice Arthur & Monica Nissén, August 2011

Case Study: Collective Story Harvesting as a strategic teambuilding activity

- **Organisation:** Wesley Community Action, Annual Team Meeting (Hui-a-Tau), 17 & 18 February 2011, Upper Hutt, New Zealand
- **Facilitator:** Mary Alice Arthur **Client:** David Hanna, Director

This case study shows how collective story harvesting methodology can be extended to support group and organisational development. General applications are noted in blue.

Wesley Community Action began in 1952 as a community expression of the Methodist Church in the Wellington region and was originally called *Wesley Wellington Mission*. The Wesleyhaven Village, a rest home for the elderly, was its first development, but since that time the vision of facilitating a just and caring community, with a strong focus on social justice, has led to a wide range of social initiatives supporting those most marginalised in the community. WCA is becoming a leading voice in the social services sector and with government. WCA supports communities from Wellington, the capital of New Zealand, through the Hutt Valley and Porirua up to Otaki, the southern part of the South Island of New Zealand.

WCA is practice in action for bringing about the Methodist vision of a safe and sustainable society where every citizen is valued, respected and enjoys equal opportunities to lead a fulfilled life. Its work now encompasses all ages, including youth foster care and support, working on helping communities beyond the cycles of debt, and leading edge initiatives with gangs. WCA has both full and part time staff of 180, many doing shift work at Wesleyhaven Village, as well as a group of 90 volunteers. It is an ethnically diverse and richly experienced group, but being geographically spread (like many organisations), teams have concentrated more on their own sphere of work and influence, rather than on the overall cohesion and direction of the organisation.

Both the Director, David Hanna, and the Practice Manager, Robyn Pope, attended the first AoH training in 2009 and began to emphasise more participatory practices in their work. David said at the time: *“At first Robyn and I were reluctant to commit to a three day training session on hosting conversations -- by the end we wished we had brought a larger team! Experiencing practices that support authentic conversations between people is simple and powerfully transformative to conventional organisational structures and systems.”* As a result, a group of team leaders attended the training in 2010. WCA now wants to put more emphasis on storytelling and storysharing as a foundation for the development of its wider practice and organisational development. They saw their annual team meeting as an opportunity to begin this work with the wider team.

Planning for the meeting

David, Robyn and I began by agreeing that **the thread of story would be the connection through the whole of the group's time together**. This container was easy to create because the event itself was being held on a marae (a Maori space - land and ancestral buildings), and protocol demands that the group be formally welcomed and that we begin with a Mihimihi (personal introductions), which grounds each of us in place and in the group. We decided to influence these introductions by asking people to share how being part of Wesley Community Action has shaped their personal story.



The Wesley team is welcomed on to the marae.

Any introduction round can be shaped through posing a powerful question that calls forth stories and helps the group see their connection to each other and to the work at the centre of the meeting.

Next we turned our attention to how to tell the WCA story. It is a complex and interwoven story – as many systemic stories are – how can we deliver something understandable and concise? We decided to break the story into three parts:

- **Wesley:** the story of the founder, John Wesley, his radical societal stance in the 1700s, re-establishing the foundation of where WCA came from and seeing what the story says for us today
- **Community:** the focus on being in and working with community that Wesleyhaven Village represents, and some of the lessons it brings in terms of resource management, commitment and letting go, the need to transform parts of a story that are held and are no longer true
- **Action:** having a look at initiatives taking the vision further in the form of Te Whare, two homes for young people and how it has developed and changed

And while we knew many people held elements of the story, we decided that the storytelling team would be limited to certain people and others would be asked in the moment whether they had anything else that needed to be contributed.

Work with the storytelling team in advance of the event. Get clear about the shape and scope of the story and focus on how to make clear the elements of the story you want to bring forward. Then decide who will be involved.

We also decided on the arcs we would harvest as a group. For this we turned to the WCA mission statement for inspiration: *“Wesley Community Action contributes to just and caring communities. We work through authentic relationships with people to support their transformation and that of communities and society. Our work is unique, flexible and high quality.”* We also had a look at the three key goals for the next three years, which talked of WCA being recognised as a leader in innovative transformative



Mary Alice talks with a harvesting team about the process.

practice and in shaping key policies affecting families/communities, and as having viable and efficient capacity to achieve its goals and commitments. We decided to harvest the following arcs:

- **Story arc:** This happened, then this, then that...
- **Questions:** What questions arise for me from this story that I can apply to our/my work?
- **Key Learnings:** What can we learn from this story?
- **Authentic relationships:** If we say people are the most important in our work, what does our story tell us about the nature of our relationships and how to create them?
- **Transformation & Collaboration:** When were points of transformation and collaboration in our story? What could we learn from them?
- **Being unique, innovative, being a leader:** What does our story tell us about what we uniquely are and do? When and how have we been innovative or a leader?
- **Taking risks; Letting go:** What does our story tell us about when we should take risks and when we should let go?

What is it you most want to learn from your story? How to be more strategic? How to reinvigorate your founding story? What you can use elsewhere? Use this as the foundation for crafting your harvesting arcs.

At the meeting

Approximately 40 people gathered for the full meeting, with more than 50 present for the evening session. The day began with a Powhiri – this traditional Maori ritual of engagement performed by the elders of the marae, welcomed us into the marae and connected us to the people of that place and made us one of them for our stay. This process acknowledges the living and those that have gone before us. This connected us into an existing powerful StoryField in a way that freed us to share and grow our own story. The marae StoryField is regarded as tapu (sacred) by Maori.

After the powhiri an elder of the marae explained to us the significance of the carvings and patterns that decorate the whare (house). These were the harvestings of earlier generations.

We began in the morning with three people harvesting the introduction round in three very different ways. Only one of these was fed back after the round in the morning. The full story process ran from mid-day on Thursday to mid-day on Friday (with Thursday morning consisting of group introductions and Friday afternoon of reviewing the time together), and had these elements:

Thursday



The Mihimihi or introduction round.

- **Framing & introduction:** David set the scene about why we were investigating the WCA story together and what it could mean to the organisation. He set a clear purpose, intention and framework for how this work fit into the way Wesley wants to move forward. I talked about the power of story, outlined the process and how it would work.

Good framing is the key to participants understanding where this work fits into their wider work and what opportunities might be possible from it. We had the intention of bringing the group into a collective StoryField together, as well as giving them practice (perhaps for the first time) in harvesting. We felt these two areas of focus were the most important part of the experience together.

- **Setting up teams:** I introduced the harvesting arcs and asked people to step forward and become a group around each of the arcs. Since we also wanted this to be an opportunity for teambuilding, we asked people to move into mixed groups. Then we gave the teams 15 minutes to meet, get familiar with their topic and decide how they would harvest as a team. The storytelling team also met during this time to finalise the story and how they would present it. One of the key members of the team was called away and they had to decide how to cover the gap.

I wanted to emphasise that it is not easy to harvest – and it is especially challenging to pay attention for an extended period – and to focus the teams on agreeing a strategy. I also had to clarify for some teams that they weren't being asked to brainstorm the arc they had been given, but rather to listen for what they would harvest from the story itself.



David (seated) and the Storytelling Team preparing their contribution.

- **The storytelling team presented the WCA story and the others harvested:** Some teams worked together at a flipchart, others took notes independently, some used Post Its.
- **The harvesters reported in:** We heard key points from each of the teams, while the Storytelling Team harvested.
- **We heard the harvest of the harvest:** The Storytelling Team reported back the key insights they gained from hearing the wider harvest, answering the question: “What do you see with new eyes from this harvest?”

*I found this part of the exercise reinforced for me again the power of having attentive, focused listening and how it shapes the story being told. We intended to move from here into groups **identifying opportunities that arose from hearing the story** (What are some of the possibilities/doorways/potentials the story points to?) but we ran out of time.*

- In our **group reflection**, we immediately heard how the founding story had been claimed and was beginning to be integrated by those present, and how



Harvesting team at work.

it now sounded as if people were stepping into a collective story.

At 6 pm a group of Wesley stakeholders, volunteers and partners joined us and stayed until 9:30 pm. They were formally welcomed by the team and we had dinner together, then gathered as a group. David once again set the scene.

- **Community storysharing:** I asked people to come together in groups of five, introduce themselves and to **share a story of their experience of Wesley Community Action at its best** for 30 minutes. Then I asked the groups whether they had a story that would be a gift to the rest of us and five storytellers came forward. The stories were a perfect range – from a *volunteer*, a story about a woman who had been the life and soul of Wesleyhaven and how they had honoured her passing; *two co-workers* told in tandem a story of a colleague who had painstakingly built a relationship of trust over five years with someone difficult to help; a *staff member* told of the courage and perseverance of a young boy who would not give up his dream of the perfect family; a *funder* talked about the partnership relationship she feels she's part of with Wesley. At the end we came back into a circle and others were invited to share what the stories raised for them.



Community storysharing.

Although the evening programme sounded social and welcoming, we had a very strategic intention behind it – to bring those involved with Wesley more deeply into relationship and into contact with the Wesley story. You might want to consider exactly how and when you involve your senior team, Board, stakeholders, partners and others in the story work you do.

Friday

- **Reflections from our time together so far:** The two other harvesters opened the day by reflecting on the major themes and threads they harvested the previous morning, then the group broke into trios to share reflections. This was especially good for integrating the few new participants.
- **Teams reflected on applications from the wider story:** The group broke into functional teams to reflect on what applications they could draw from the wider Wesley story. Animated conversations, reflections on the work of other teams stemming from the previous conversation and action steps were the result.

Practical application is key! What do you want to learn from your story that can be applied immediately somewhere else? How will you create the link between the story and possible action?



Reporting back from functional teams.

- **The Ropes Game:** We decided to break up our deep sitting and speaking reflection with a hands-on learning experience, using the Ropes Game

(instructions can be found on www.artofhosting.ning.com). We debriefed together about what the teams learned about leadership, teamwork and Wesley.

*Being active and outside lifted our energy and integrated the newcomers into the wider inquiry. After our debrief, we intended to move to working with the “Wesley Way” practice framework and the 2011 - 13 strategic goals (asking **what did we learn from our story that could support us deepening our practice and achieving our strategic goals?**), but we ran out of time.*

- **Where does the story go from here?:** I introduced this session by saying that now that we know our story, we have moved from passive to active StoryHolders and can decide where the story goes from here. Groups of five gathered to craft the next stage of the 2011 Wesley story and presented their version back to the full group.



Ropes game produces smiles!

Results

This work together had a very powerful impact on the Wesley Community Action team during the event. We could see them tangibly stepping into holding a collective story together and being energised by it. We could see teams viewing their own story differently and we could see a collective sense of “who we are as Wesley” rising.

The link between the storytelling process and the hosting of our gathering on a marae was extremely powerful. The Whare Tipuna (Ancestral house) we met in is a house of stories – stretching back many generations for many Maori tribes – this was an existing potent StoryField that was a container within which we could explore our ‘Wesley’ story. A deeper ‘mauri’ (life-force) was awakened.



The Authentic Relationships team at work.

The harvesting team that met shortly after the event agreed there were three key areas arising out of the work to focus on:

- **Knowing our heritage & founding story means we can take our story further –** One of the Maori team members said: “I thought Maori were the only ones with Whakapapa!”, meaning he had seen the power of a heritage story in creating shared meaning and place. Having the founding story held by the collective offers opportunities to dig into it more fully, looking for clues of how to expand and deepen our collective inquiry and field of potential.
- **Knowing our story gives us additional levers to deepen a collective practice –** The story emphasised the transition the organisation is now in, moving from “hero” to “host”, as well as the capacities that could be deepened in balancing method (consistent and methodical practice, which is where the name

“Methodism” came from) and movement (what is created when a vision ignites a group of people).

- **The story itself emphasises the major tenants of the organisation: connectedness, community & relationship** – Working with the story essentially reinforced both the goals and the intended way of working of the organisation. One of the teams talking about applying the story to their work agreed that being community and being connected was a conscious choice from this moment. In addition, participants saw their place in the story and their connectedness through the story.

Speaking about the work we did together, David said: *"I had a strong hunch that using a Story Harvesting framework would be valuable for Wesley Community Action. In saying this, I didn't know how it would work or what it would look like. I'm glad I went with my hunch! The universality of 'story' and the way that everyone's story is valid and real has contributed to a more motivated and connected team of people within Wesley."*



David frames the evening.

Contributed by Mary Alice Arthur & David Hanna, February 2011

How Collective Story Harvesting can work with other methodologies

Collective Story Harvesting is an ideal partner for other methodologies and can lead directly into:

- A **World Café** taking questions surfaced during the process deeper and creating an on-going community conversation.
- An **Open Space** session where participants can inquire into applying the learning directly into their projects or practice.
- **Circle** work focused on deepening community, working on issues or questions that have arisen or integrating what has been learned.
- An **Appreciative Inquiry** focusing on appreciative topics that have arisen out of the story harvest to shift challenges and open possibilities.
- Further **illuminating the founding story** or **shaping the future story** of the system. Additional **storytelling/storysharing** by participants to personally link to the story harvested or the StoryField that is being created.
- **Collecting additional stories** to illuminate learning points or **disseminating the harvested story** more widely to the stakeholders.

- Developing **strategy, powerful questions, principles, values, the value proposition**, etc.
- As a frame for **additional teambuilding, cross-functional and cross-organisational work** or **creating new fields of practice**.

*Draw your chair up close to the edge
of the precipice and I'll tell you a story.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald --- Notebooks