Intro to me
Intro to ISF

We all think about the future.
We anticipate, we plan, we dream.

- Thinking about the future is an innate human capacity. It is one of the things that has made us the most successful species on the planet.
- There would be no agriculture if we were not able to think and plan ahead, and no civilisations built on agriculture.
- We think about the future when we plan our days, our weeks, our years, our careers, our lives.

We are all born storytellers. Stories are how we make sense of the world.

- In Wired for Story, Lisa Cron writes that "Story is what enabled us to imagine what might happen in the future, and so prepare for it - a feat no other species can lay claim to...Story is what makes us human, not just metaphorically but literally".
- "We think in story. It's hardwired in our brain. It's how we make strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us".

Stories about the past (history) can draw on evidence to convince us

- When we talk about the past, we can draw on evidence – documents, photographs, video, eyewitness accounts, databases, historical records
- We can use that evidence to make our story more credible.
- Scientists apply particular standards to evidence to make it even more credible.
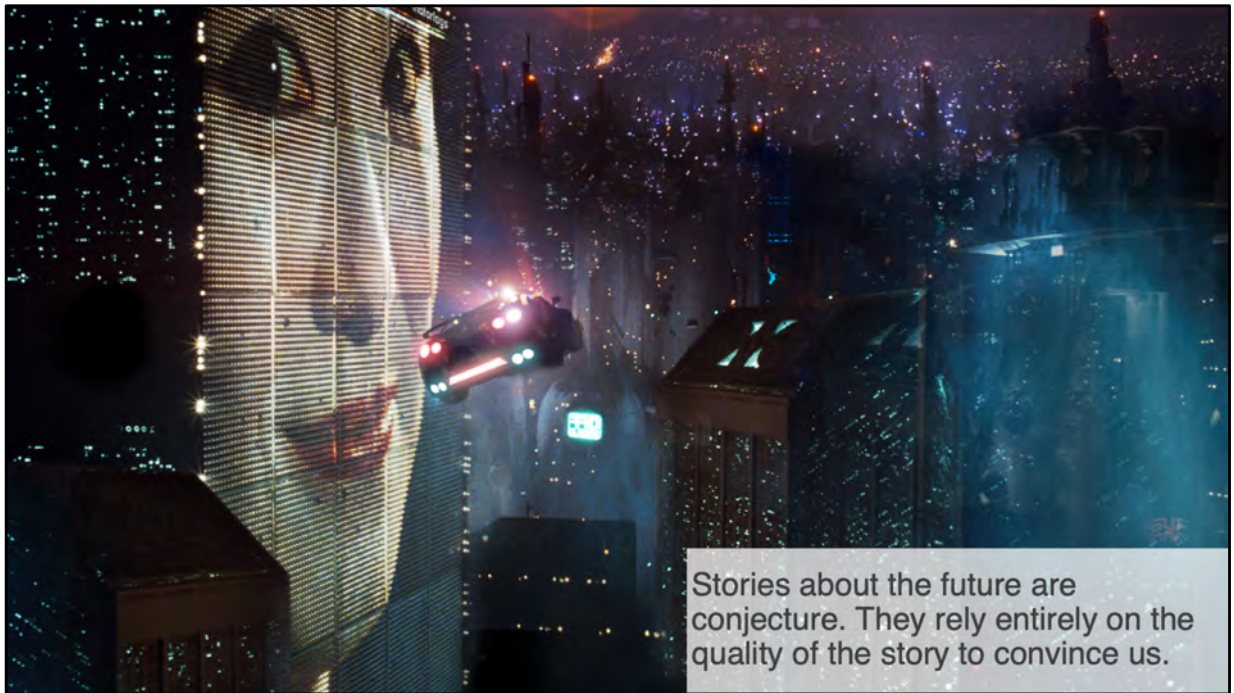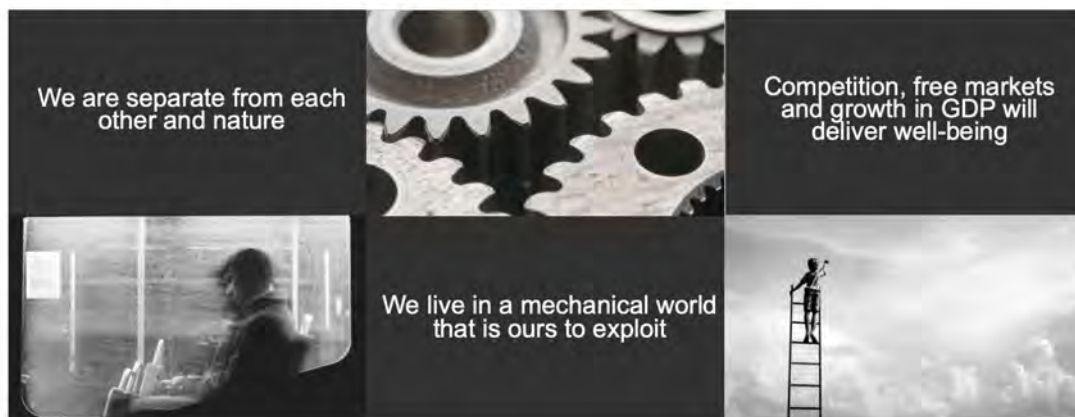
Stories about the future are conjecture. They rely entirely on the quality of the story to convince us.

- When we talk about the future, we have no evidence. The future is not yet written. It is a blank page waiting be filled with our stories.
- And we fill this blank space with an endless variation of stories, trying to imagine what is yet to come, and what it means for the things we do today.

The techno utopia - Wakanda
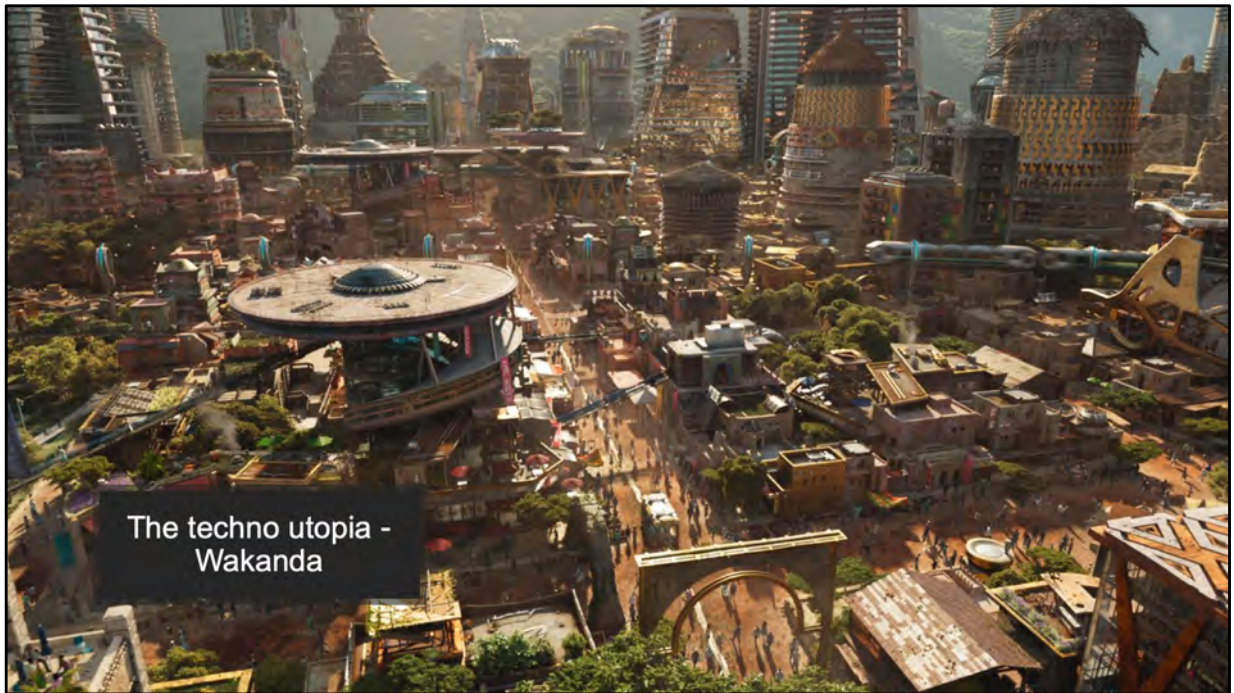
- The stories we tell about the future are hugely diverse, but four types of story dominate
- The future we are sold by economic elites is one of continued economic growth and expansion towards a future that is bigger and better – a techno-utopia like the one depicted in the Disney movie Tomorrowland, or the urban utopia of Wakanda in the Marvel movies.
- For many, this is the business as usual scenario – the goal of the economic growth we are always talking about.

The story of Separation

We are separate from each other and nature

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

We live in a mechanical world that is ours to exploit

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Of course, as this audience knows, there is a dark side to this story – this vision of the future – that is swept under the carpet. It is a narrative that hides continued exploitation, inequality and destruction of natural resources. Charles Eisenstein has called it a story of Separation. This story operates on a global scale, has deep historical and cultural roots, and structures the stories told at other scales. It combines a neo-liberal economic ideology with a myth of human separation from, and dominance over, nature. It positions endless economic growth as the primary goal of society. The result is continuous exploitation of material resources, while disregarding the ecological destruction and human misery that results. If we are to respond effectively to sustainability challenges, transformation of this dominant story that shapes human society is crucial.

The dystopia – *Blade Runner 2049*

- The second kind of future warns what could happen if we continue down our current path. Humanity over-reaches, fails to recognise the Earth's boundaries and experiences collapse or decline into some form of dystopia. I've used the example of Blade Runner but there are any number of popular culture touch points I could draw on – The Walking Dead, the Fallout series in gaming, The Hunger Games

- There are different kinds of dystopia. There's total collapse, like The Road, or there's dystopias where inequity is extreme – the rich live well and the poor struggle outside walled cities, like The Hunger Games.
- In this future, there may be no functional economy, or the economy may be characterized by extreme inequality, perhaps even worse than today
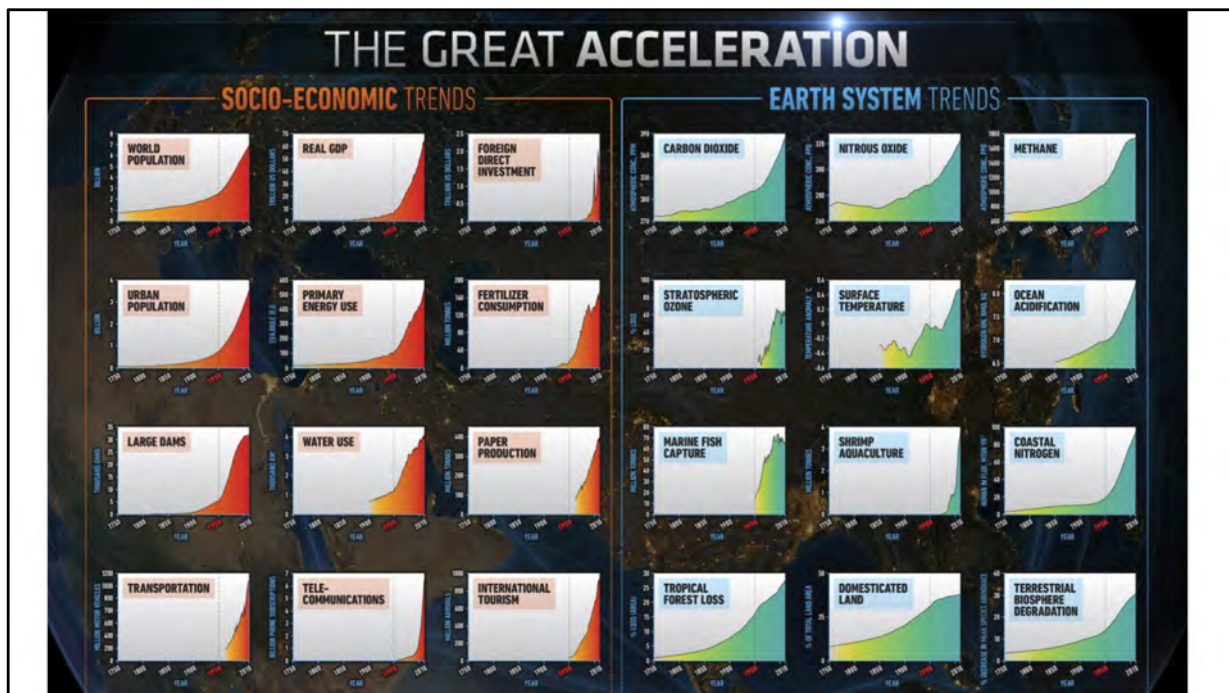
- This kind of dystopian vision of the future is now commonplace. And there's certainly no shortage of evidence that this is the way we are headed.
- Starting with seminal environmental works like Rachel Carson's Silent Spring and The Limits to Growth, we have become all too familiar with the dark side of progress – climate change, deforestation, water wars, grinding poverty, ecological and social collapse. These dystopian visions have become the fodder of Hollywood. The science on which they are based is compelling (except in the case of zombie apocalypse) and futures where we overshoot the carrying capacity of the Earth and human civilisation collapses are a real possibility.

For a certain kind of person, they can be motivating. For me, becoming aware of the dark side of the future pushed me down a path of working hard to avoid that kind of future and reclaim the optimism of my childhood. But for others, this kind of vision is anything but motivating.

Sustenance and discipline – Transition Towns

- The third story of the future responds to the threat of collapse by exercising restraint and moving towards local sustenance
- There is a focus on local communities and local economies, e.g. local currency systems etc.
- A good example is the Transition Town movement with its focus on 'energy descent'

This kind of future relies on people being able to exercise restraint, to be satisfied with enough rather than always wanting more stuff. There are real questions about such a future is plausible, based on our track record, and also whether such a future is scalable in a world where the population is rapidly approaching 8 billion. Can local food systems do enough to feed such a population, for example?
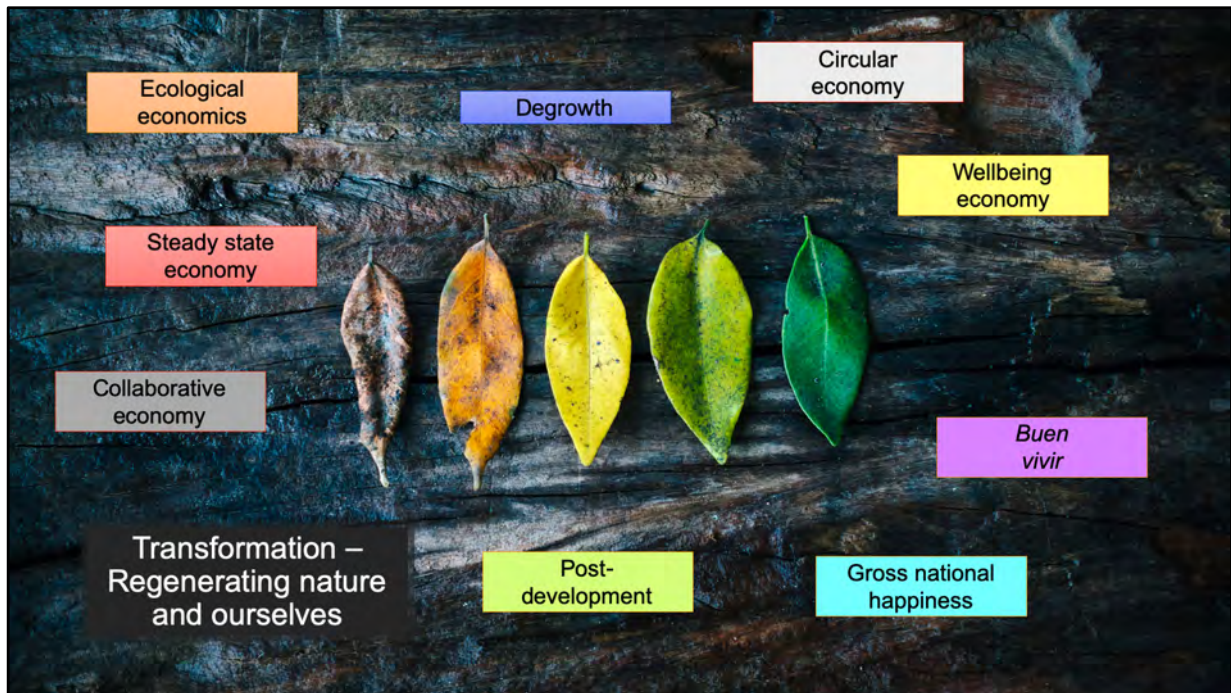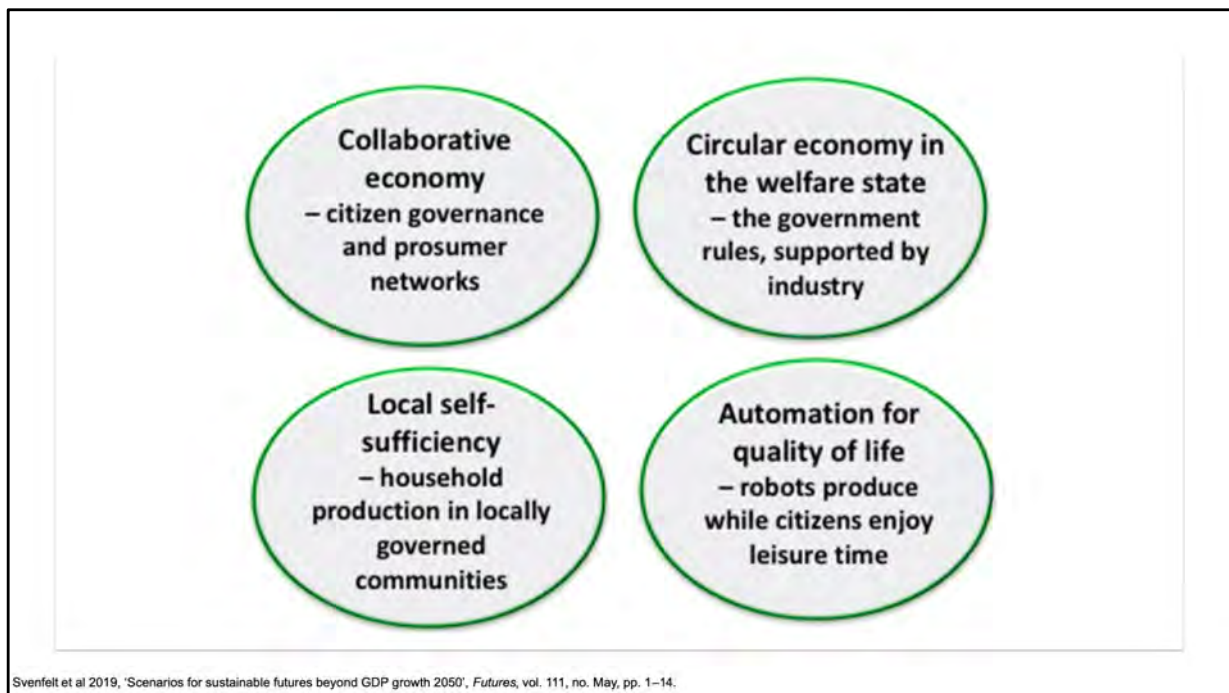
The final future is one of transformation. It embraces technology but imagines a transformation of human values and priorities that allows us to thrive within planetary boundaries, building a new kind of sustainable civilisation.

Exactly what such a future might look like remains unclear – it could have many of these elements.

Image: Richard Register, Eco City Builders

A key difference from the sustenance and discipline future is that transformation would not mean retreating back to local communities and away from global connections, but strengthening both the local and the global – what has been called a 'glocal' approach.

It could be a beautiful future, with cities that look like this.

Collaborative economy
– citizen governance and prosumer networks

Circular economy in the welfare state
– the government rules, supported by industry

Local self-sufficiency
– household production in locally governed communities

Automation for quality of life
– robots produce while citizens enjoy leisure time

Svenfelt et al 2019, 'Scenarios for sustainable futures beyond GDP growth 2050', *Futures*, vol. 111, no. May, pp. 1–14.

But there are many uncertainties. Who will lead the transformation and how will this affect where we end up. A recent scenario exercise imagined four scenarios for futures beyond GDP growth. One of the big differences is in the role played by different sectors – do citizens lead, or government, or technology, or business?

Will transformation be possible without a fight? I doubt it. Transformation is messy, chaotic, full of protest and resistance. Existing institutions will not let go of power easily. I recently attended the Transformations2019 conference in Santiago, Chile, when protests broke out in the streets – a reminder that transformation may require destruction of the old.

Royal Society for the Arts, UK, 2019
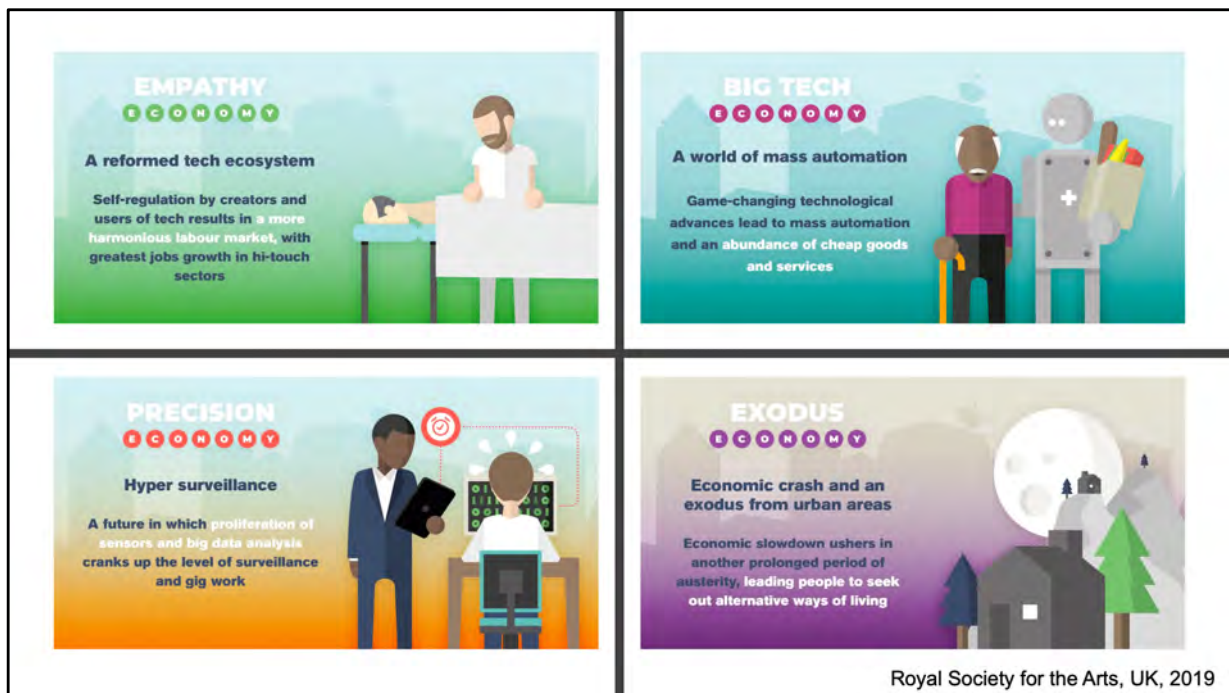
And once a transformation gets underway, can we control it? Where will it end up? Will it deliver what we hope for, or start a slide into a different kind of future?
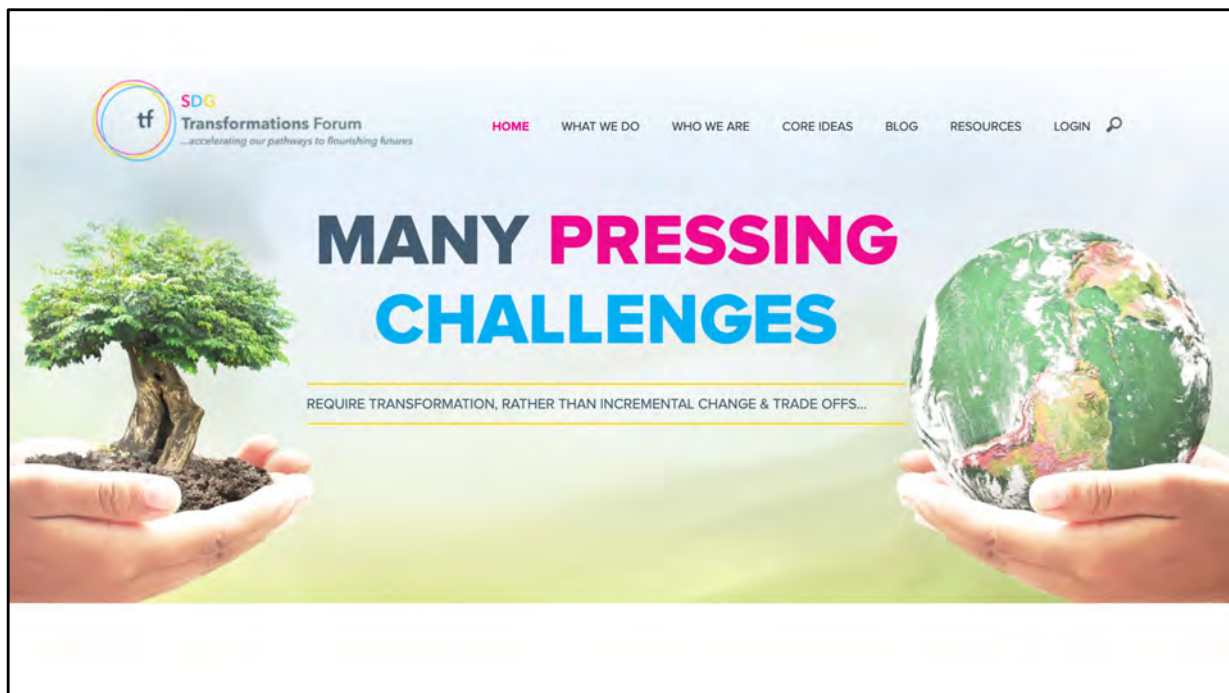
While there are clearly dangers and uncertainties, I still believe that transformation is the only way forward. As my friend Ioan Fazey says, transformation is coming whether we like it or not, either from the impacts of climate change and a failing economic system, or from proactive action to respond. So let's try and guide transformation in positive directions.

I've been working over the past two years with a group called the SDG Transformations Forum, that is a global network of practitioners that are trying to facilitate transformation towards flourishing futures. You could say that our goal is to make it more likely that the futures that emerge from transformation are those that work for the many rather than the few.
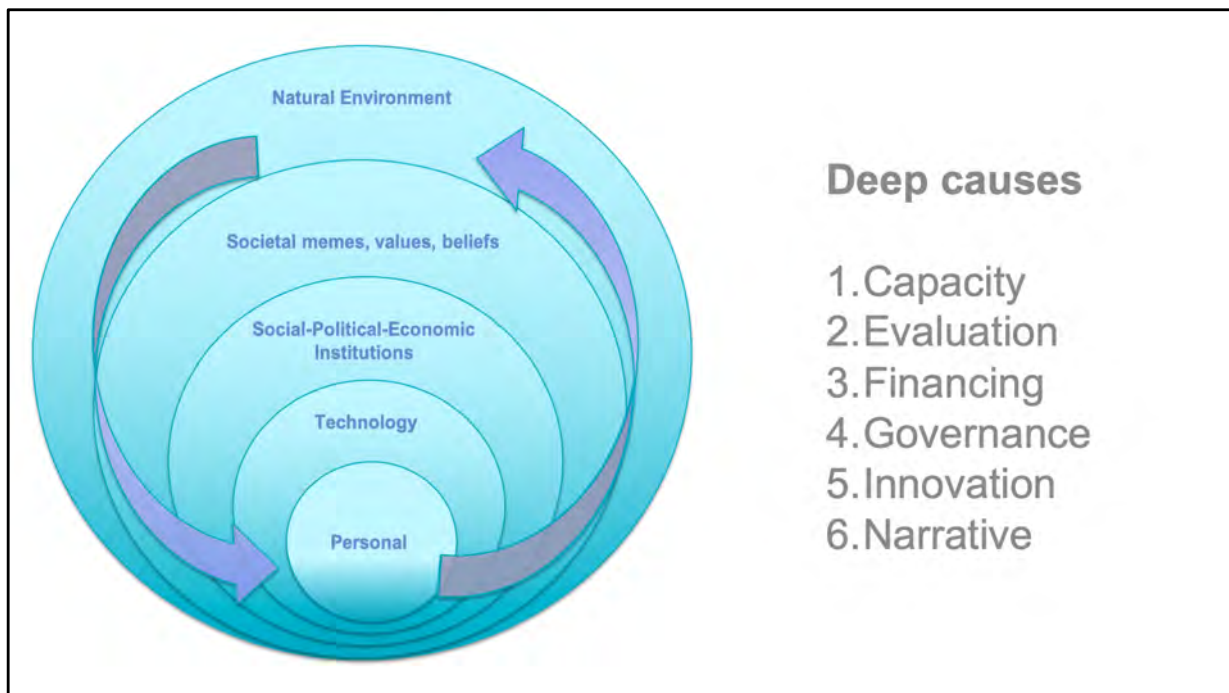
The Forum has identified that we need transformations in all of the spheres listed here, and is particularly working on six deep causes of unsustainability. The final one, narrative, is the one I'm working on. I personally think that shifting our deep narratives about what it means to be human on this planet is a crucial element to guide transformation in a positive direction.

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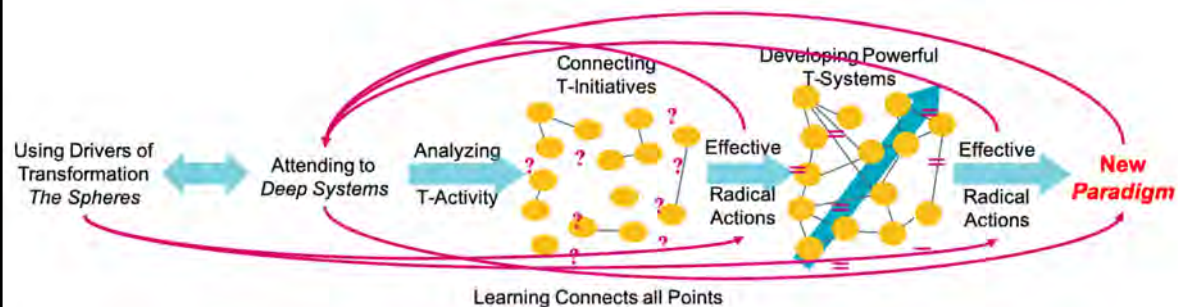*~ Erin Morgenstern*

- We are working on story and narrative, because our stories about the future are much more than mere entertainment. They have power. They shape the future. They are in constant contestation with other stories.
- A core concept of futures thinking is that the future is not fixed and that humans can influence the future. The stories we tell about the future are direct attempts to shape the future. They subtly alter the way we see reality. Our stories, our ideas, are now the main drivers of evolution on this planet.
- The Imaginary Foundation says that "imagination allows us to conceive of delightful future possibilities, pick the most amazing one and pull the present forward to meet it". And so we imagined people landing on the moon, and then we went and did it.

The novelist Erin Morgenstern expressed this idea very poetically when she said...

The stories we tell about the future have the power to move people and to change the future.
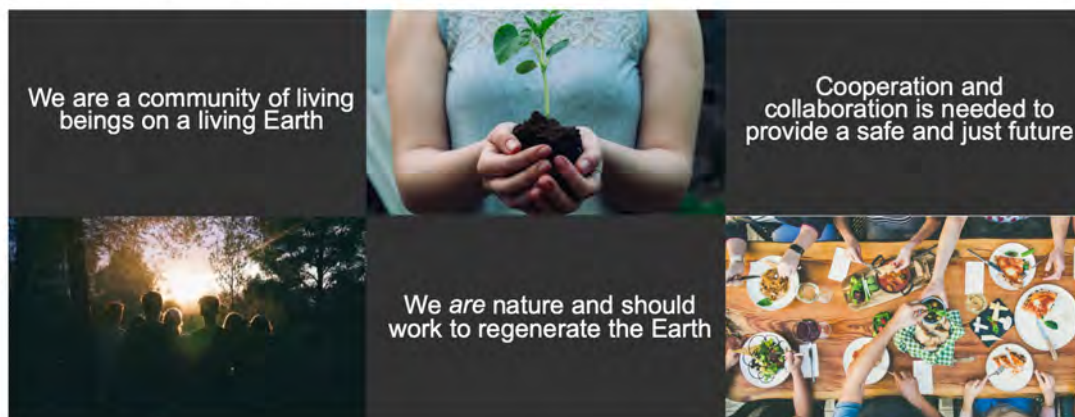
We have a Transforming Narratives team that is working on how to help new stories about the future to emerge and connect.

The story of Interbeing

We are a community of living beings on a living Earth

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

We *are* nature and should work to regenerate the Earth

UTS

The rough shape of such a story is already out there in the stories and language of countless sustainability initiatives around the world. It is a story that respects planetary boundaries and fosters life, community, connectedness, solidarity, regeneration and resilience. It will emphasise wellbeing, dignity, and justice for all and recognize our interdependence and connectedness to each other and to nature. Eisenstein calls it a Story of Interbeing, to move on from the Story of Separation.

Some tentative principles

- The story of a transformed future needs to grow and interweave from the grassroots, not be imposed by an elite – it must be crowd sourced but somehow steer clear of the dangers of populism

- The story must accommodate diversity but have enough common ground for most people to get on board

- The story must respect planetary limits, provide social justice for all, and regenerate what has been lost

- One promising approach is to identify 'memes' that can be incorporated into stories of the future

Storytellers construct stories from 'memes'

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

- Some particular important kinds of memes for stories include:

  - **Metaphors**: understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980)
  - **Frames**: Mental structures that order our ideas; and communicative tools that evoke these structures and shape our perceptions and interpretations over time (Holmes et al 2011)
  - **Tropes**: a commonly-seen theme or element of a story that becomes recognisable through repeated use, e.g. the hero's journey
  - **Archetypes**: a type of trope (usually a character) that represents something universal about the human condition, e.g. a hero, villain, trickster, scapegoat or mentor
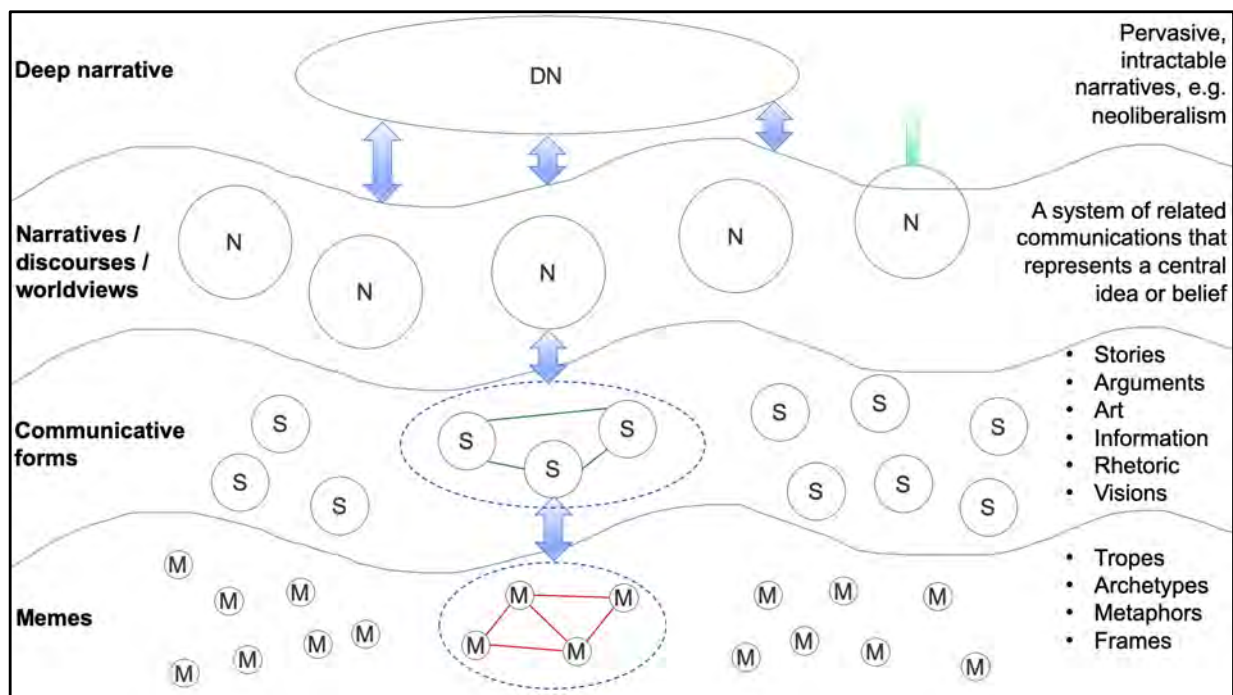
Key points:
- Storytellers select which story elements to include in their story and which to leave out. This is framing.
- A story is only one kind of communication – there are plenty of others, like arguments and art and informational narratives. But stories are particularly powerful due to their structure.
- Multiple stories (and other kinds of communication) give rise to narratives (or discourses) – a system of related communications that represents a central idea or belief
- Narratives that become particularly pervasive and intractable are known as deep narratives.
- The narrative with the green arrow is an emerging narrative that is trying to challenge the dominant narrative.
- The blue arrows indicate that there are recursive relationships – stories are constructed from elements, but the act of storytelling can also give rise to or change the meaning of story elements. Narratives are constructed from multiple stories but narratives also shape what stories are told. And deep narratives are formed from story elements and communications and narratives, but also shape and constrain all of the layers below.

- The pace of change slows down from bottom to top – story elements evolve rapidly, communications almost as rapidly, narratives and discourses change much more slowly, and deep narratives evolve very slowly.

WeAll has recently laid out five principles that it sees as part of the new story of a wellbeing economy – these are what we mean by memes.

A simple visioning process

1. Take participants through a guided visualization exercise to imagine they are in the future, say 2040.

2. Ask them to draw what they saw / felt during the exercise.

3. Pair up with someone else to talk about their visions and identify common memes.

4. Roll up into groups of four to share and find common ground.

5. Depending on group size, repeat or open up into a discussion about what memes have emerged.
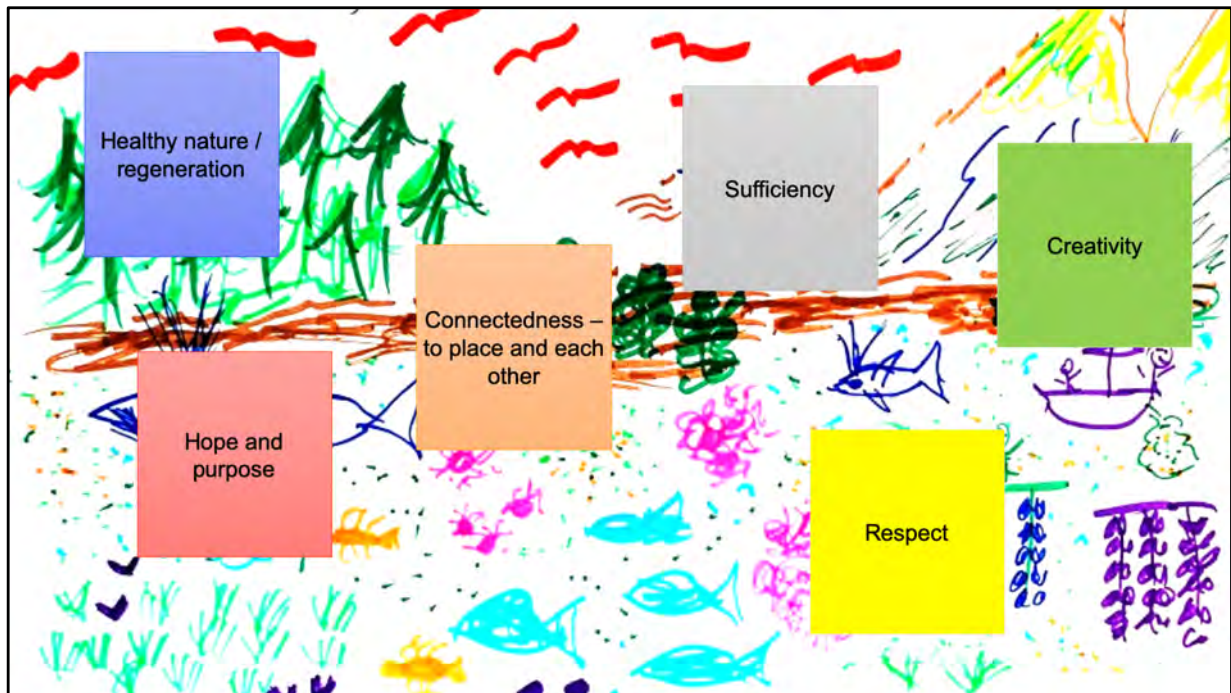
New Stories for a Sustainable Future
(planetcentric.net/blog/new-stories)

We have a survey out at the moment to collect stories from a much broader community. We would love your input.

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