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Rethinking the American National Narratives: Finding a way forward with our past and with hope

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Rethinking the American National Narratives:
Finding a way forward with our past and with hope

Everyday, it seems that more storm clouds gather around the country I have called home my whole life. Sensationalized and entirely fake news stories, and comment sections rife with anger and distrust, fill our screens. My Gen Z peers and I yell into the void, hopeless for our future, joking about our impending doom. These jokes don't ever quite land. They are a bit too close to the truth.

Yet I have to ask myself, is this the truth? Are we truly fighting a pointless battle against omnipotent structures of oppression? Change has happened before, change that seemed daunting at other times. But is this country now capable of the breadth and depth of changes that we need? Is our democracy crumbling before our eyes? These are the questions I ask myself, looking at the American landscape during my life.

Social psychologist Jonathon Haidt tells us that one essential part of a successful democracy are its shared stories. The amalgamation of the stories we tell about America's past, present, and future make up the American narrative. Each of these stories constitutes a framework of values and assumptions. These frameworks show us how to understand the world, understand our place in it, and how to act in it. As Harvard history professor, Jill Lepore, discusses in her work "A New Americanism" that a national narrative is a collective agreement on a common history and a shared, plausible future. She writes that a national narrative is a form of glue for a nation.

Narratives have the power to bind us together, to unify and make us stronger, but they can also divide us. They can allow for lines to be drawn between people, creating villains and heroes of each story. Preying on our differences, framing our world as us versus them, stories like these are currently doing a better job at pulling us apart than holding us together.

While narrative is not by any means the only cause of our country's issues, it can be part of the solution. Cultural connector and knowledge broker Isabel Crabtree-Condor put it this way: "understanding narratives and what lies behind or under them, is one way of digging more consciously into that invisible web of forces that maintain the status quo." If we want to progress, to change our cultural landscape, we need to examine what these stories value and hold true. We need to untangle the invisible web.

To understand the ways each can shape a person's perspective, Melody Barnes, co-director of the Democracy Initiative, and Thad Williamson, an associate professor at the University of Richmond, have identified four categories of American narrative. One of these, the *American sham* narrative, is the lens I have been seeing the United States with. It suggests that the struggle for progressive change is an uphill battle. It is worth struggling, but this may be ultimately futile because American democratic rhetoric is a sham.

The *American insecurity* narrative suggests the American Dream may no longer exist. The dream was once possible, but we may have lost the chance to achieve it. In this narrative, power has been taken from the everyday, working person through income inequality, and populist ideas are the only way to rebalance the power.

Meanwhile, the *American nostalgia* narrative focuses on America as a leader in liberty and military strength, but is concerned about the nation growing weaker as it moves away from traditional values.

The narrative of *durable America* affirms America's future triumph by holding up our uninterrupted history of economic success and technological innovation. Through this lens, America will endure because we have made it through every blunder in the past. Each of these stories has an implicit purpose: to criticize the system, to invigorate the population, to maintain an ideal, to assuage fears. However, each of these stories only holds a piece of the puzzle, one fractured piece of a window. With only these partial and competing glimpses, how can we move forward together? Each defines for us what is right and what is wrong and how we choose to act as a result. Each holds their own implicit assumptions and values, but are these the assumptions and values we want to consciously uphold?

A new story, one that centers a commitment to empathy across our differences, and sees those differences as strengths, can be our stepping stone to unity and progress. But such a story needs to be truthful. It is important to recognize that there is more than one type of truth. This is illustrated by Angel Adams Parham's, a "Tale of Two Stories: Meditations on the American Dream." Her essay asks us to consider how our dominant national narrative is a consistent disappointment, particularly for people of color, and it invites us to discuss the differences of our lived experiences.

In this context, she makes a critical distinction between factual truths, the pieces of information that are empirically true, and existential truths, truths of how people emotionally

experience things. Emotions persuade more strongly than facts in most cases. Since we need to understand each others' narratives before we can write a new one, understanding the existential truths that are the basis of different narratives is essential.

When faced with existential truths that differ from our own, it is tempting to dismiss them as entirely false. We live in a time when these differences are being used to tear us apart and we are urged to disagree with or disregard others. The solution is not ignoring our differences, nor is it trying to be the same as everyone else. We need to acknowledge our differences and use them to make us stronger. That is the goal of a shared story.

In Harvard professor and political theorist Danielle Allen's piece "The Four Kinds of Truth America Needs to Pursue Reconciliation," she explains that understanding the existential truths of another's story makes us "able to understand others as they understand themselves." So rather than seeing only how our stories differ, we can find empathy. Empathy lets us listen more deeply, focuses on our commonalities, leading to a more productive conversation that gives space to many voices.

Existential truths are just one example of the small changes in our own mindsets that have a deep impact on our discussions and our potential for change. Starting with ourselves, we can then invite our community into the conversation and grow it to the national level.

If we do not speak a new story into existence, those in power will do it for us. People like Trump have already used the idea of national narrative to create division and polarization. Their stories are carefully crafted to encourage us to stay entrenched perspectives and to protect their own power. This will continue without our intervention as a people. The time to start these discussions is now.

Social activist Elena Mejía Julca is currently working on narrative change and explains that, "social movements don't have the resources to take on those with the mass media narrative power. We need more spaces to question narratives in a conscious way."

We can create that space by adding our own stories to the collection amassed by the StoryCorps organization. It aims to "to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world." The collection teaches the value of listening, and promotes that everyone's story matters.

We can take inspiration and participate in conversations about our desires for the future with US@250. This organization supports a variety of initiatives to discuss the future of our

narrative, such as an annual survey on Americans beliefs, ambitions, and hopes. Through their work, we discover that we have more in common than we think.

Within our social networks, we can host meals to foster narrative conversations with the help of Make America Dinner Again. Their informative guides teach how to lead difficult and potentially polarizing conversations and how to interact with respect and empathy to have a productive conversation. Each of these organizations provides a space for this work to occur, and to be furthered by as many voices as possible.

Change is slow, daunting, sometimes seemingly impossible. But with our voices together, we can rethink how we tell the story of our nation and take a step in the direction of progress. We can listen to one another, and acknowledge the traumas of our past. We can find our shared dreams and our hope for the future.

The mindset fostered to create a new, shared American narrative will not only allow us to problem solve at the national level. It could extend beyond, to the global stage. We would be better at finding our commonalities, respecting our differences, and believing in hope. Hope has the power to break through the storm clouds covering our nation. We can make that hope by voicing our re-envisioned American national narrative.