



Powered by Storytelling

Excavate, Craft and Present Stories to Transform Business Communication

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

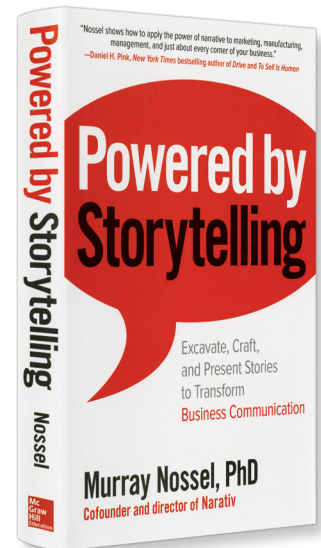
What's your story? It's a question human beings have been asking each other since we first gathered around a campfire. Millennia later, this human need for storytelling hasn't changed. We communicate most effectively through our personal stories — and our professional success depends on it.

Powered by Storytelling shows you how to tap into the timeless power of storytelling to transform your business. Executive coach, motivational speaker and psychologist Murray Nossel, Ph.D., distills decades of experience into a simple method that will enable you to find the right story for a particular audience and purpose; connect with business associates on a more personal, relatable level; share your corporate vision and goals — and get others on board; integrate storytelling into all your communications for ongoing success; and more.

Everyone needs to communicate well to succeed in business. And everyone has a story to tell. A comprehensive guide to Nossel's proven three-step communications method, *Powered by Storytelling* shows you how to tell your story, connect with your audience and achieve results.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Principles and techniques of the Narativ method.
- To identify and release obstacles to listening.
- To tell stories in a way that excites and engages your audience.
- Presentation tips that help you truly connect with your audience.



by Murray Nossel, Ph.D.

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: POWERED BY STORYTELLING

by Murray Nossel, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Tibetan Buddhist monks excel at concentration. They tell a traditional tale about focus called “The Lion’s Gaze”: When you throw a ball to a dog, it chases the ball. But when you throw a ball to a lion, it keeps its gaze on you.

When we tell a story, our Lion’s Gaze is on one thing: connecting with our audience. If you were at a sales meeting, your gaze would be to connect with the other sales reps about the sale that changed your life. A leader’s gaze is to connect with his or her management team through a story about why the business exists.

Connection is where the transformation of business communication happens. In other words, the effectiveness of your communication is commensurate with the depth of your connection. And nothing makes that connection better than the story you tell.

In the Narativ method, stories are created in three phases:

- **Excavating:** Generating your story ideas.
- **Crafting:** Shaping your story elements into a classic story structure.
- **Presenting:** Performing your story for an audience.

Stories don’t live in a vacuum, however, and while you’re learning about storytelling, you’ll also be introduced to a larger framework of communication analysis into which stories are set.

To tell stories successfully, we need to understand a little about why stories connect and a lot about how to build that connection through listening and storytelling.

Let’s begin by looking at the basic principles of the Narativ method:

Principle 1. Humans are hardwired for story.

Story is the brain’s way of helping us make sense out of our lives, of creating coherence out of randomness and chaos. Most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as story.

There is a network of brain cells that are involved with storytelling. When they fire, they wire together more tightly and efficiently. Telling stories is a way of strengthening those connections in the brain. The point is, storytelling is a skill that can be developed, a muscle that can be strengthened.

Principle 2. Everyone has a story. Whether you think your story is not important or urgent enough, or whether you think that other people in your company are the storytellers, something has happened in your life that would make a great story. We simply have to know how to excavate for these events.

Principle 3. Everyone can learn to tell his or her story better. Your storytelling abilities will only improve with time and practice, but if you excavate and craft your story according to the What happened? method, your storytelling can make a quantum leap forward.

Principle 4. Everyone’s story will evolve. From the Narativ perspective, a good story evolves naturally, reflecting the reciprocal, mutually influential relationship of listening and telling. A good story is the spark of communication exchange.

Principle 5. Storytelling is every person’s access to creativity. The most basic definition of creativity is “the bringing together of already existing elements in a novel or surprising way.” Storytelling is the most democratic form of creativity because every human



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being has access to it. Your story is your birthright. In learning how to tell your story artfully by paying close attention to specific details, you are always creating something fresh and new.

Principle 6. There is a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling. We cannot tell a story if we don't feel that there is someone listening to us and paying attention. By the same token, we can't really listen to a story when the storyteller is not aware of his or her audience and is instead caught up in his or her own speech bubble. In this most basic sense, there is a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling. This principle lies at the very core of the Narativ method.

The sections that follow outline the steps of the Narativ method. Together, they form the process of excavating, crafting and presenting your story. ●

Why Story? Why Now?

Why are you choosing to tell a *story* out of the many different ways human beings communicate? And why now? Why is this the moment to tell your story?

There is no right answer to these questions. They are meant to initiate an inquiry into your communication process. You might be telling a story to portray the best way to make a sales call, or to humanize a manager to a team that has faced crisis, or to depict pivotal moments that led to the formation of your enterprise so that new hires know who you are and why you exist as a company.

In answering these questions, you'll discover two consistent components: a rationale for storytelling and a call to action. The more precisely and deeply you are able to answer them, the greater the focus of your storytelling effort will be.

There are common themes and purposes that emerge from asking the questions Why story? Why now? Here are some of them:

- Demonstrate leadership
- Explain a *raison d'être* and purpose
- Increase collaboration or teamwork
- Generate empathy
- Inspire change
- Resolve conflict
- Humanize or dimensionalize an issue or audience
- Share learning or training
- Celebrate and build culture.

Take a moment to reflect on a work project or initiative, some relational issues within a team or a newly identified target audience. Why would you use story to support that work? And what about this moment in time requires the story to be told? Explore the center and edges of those questions. You will gain greater insight the deeper you probe.

From this starting point, excavation evolves into a process of exploration and discovery. Stories require some digging. They are not ready-made. In fact, viewing them that way diminishes their return. A good example is formulaic training material or a clichéd inspirational phrase. They lack the direction and urgency of Why story? Why now? and the vitality of a good story. Work needs to be done to get to the heart of the matter. There've been no surprises yet. We haven't pushed through any boundaries. This is precisely why we must suspend judgment for a period of time: so that we don't cut short the creative process of excavation and miss out on stories that lie just below the surface.

The obstacles that stand in the way turn out to be part of the creative process itself. ●

Identify Obstacles to Listening

In Narativ training, listening creates speaking and speaking creates listening. Transformed communication is when you pay heed to the reciprocal relationship between listening and telling.

Speaking and listening influence each other throughout any conversation or presentation. Any shift in one creates a shift in the other. As we seek to connect with our audience — and to maintain that connection — being sensitive to this natural dynamic is essential.

What impedes this flow are, in Narativ parlance, “obstacles to listening.” This method prioritizes listening. For successful communication to take place in the time and space allocated for it, we should identify and release any obstacles to listening so that they don't affect the telling.

Let's explore how first we identify obstacles to listening and then how we release those obstacles.

Categories of Obstacles to Listening

As a guideline to approach the listening environment in your organization, consider the following five categories.

External obstacles. Hearing is one component of listening. As the sound and tone of the words enter the body, they cause a wide range of effects. The quality of the sound of a voice can cause feelings in the body. Some voices are musical and soothing, whereas others are harsh

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and unsettling. Other hearing obstacles include noises and other sounds, such as traffic, barking dogs, jackhammers, music or whirring air conditioners.

How does what you are seeing affect your ability to listen? If the storyteller looks sad, does that increase the level of attention you bring to his or her speaking? Does it decrease it? What judgments arise from seeing? How does the smell in the room affect your ability to listen?

Physical obstacles. These most often have to do with the body's physical needs: hunger, needing to go to the bathroom, tiredness, physical discomfort or pain, sexual arousal, clothing that's too tight or uncomfortable, rashes, feeling sick or even having a bad hair day!

Internal obstacles. Internal obstacles include thoughts, memories, emotions and feelings. You can have a variety of feelings in an hour, even within a minute, especially if you are upset or sad, or feel extreme happiness or joy. These can be obstacles to listening. Some of these obstacles are invisible to others and often to ourselves.

Psychological obstacles. Judgments of others and ourselves make it difficult to listen and be creative. "I am not good enough." "He is better than I am." "She doesn't know how to tell a story." Opinions or strong beliefs of agreement or disagreement can interfere if the listener likes or dislikes what the storyteller is saying. Opinions about religion, politics or other topics may be obstacles to listening.

Relational obstacles. The relationships we have with people often shape the way we listen to them. At work, there is a hierarchy, and that's a natural and important structure. Bringing awareness to how the hierarchy affects our listening is crucial so that we don't let it influence open listening. This is not to dismiss or undermine necessary power structures but simply to be aware of how our ideas about them affect what we hear. Otherwise, we may not contribute all that we can, or conversely, we may not allow our leaders or subordinates to contribute their best.

When you practice identifying obstacles to listening, you will notice that many of your obstacles have to do with past experiences and memories. One of the reasons we do not suppress the obstacles but just make note of them and let them be is that some of them can be material for our stories. Therefore, identifying obstacles to listening not only paves the way to releasing obstacles but also can potentially lead to identifying an experience or memory that could become a story. So pay attention to your obstacles because your next great story might be hiding in plain sight. ●

Release Obstacles to Listening

In Monday morning meetings at Narativ, releasing obstacles to listening is at the top of the agenda.

"I'm leaving for California this afternoon, and I have still a number of items to prepare for my presentation, in addition to booking a car. I'm a little scattered. Plus, it's hot out, and I'm aware of what moving through that heat will be like." Katy pauses. "That's it. That's what's in my listening."

The rest of the Narativ team acknowledges her comments with a "thank you." Then the next person speaks.

Releasing the obstacles lets your colleagues know that if you seem distracted or annoyed, for example, it's because of your own preoccupations that have nothing to do with them. This is important if you're in a leadership role because people are watching your responses and often taking them personally. With this practice, you enhance focus on the meeting at hand, enabling a purer strain of attention than one fettered by miscellaneous concerns and issues.

Releasing the obstacles to listening may be used as a general communication protocol before any meeting or conversation, because it provides a quick way to open up communication and create connection, which in turn heightens attention to the matters at hand. However, it is important to understand the roots of this practice. It derives from a component of Narativ methodology called preparing a "dedicated time and space" for listening and storytelling.

Guidelines for Creating a Dedicated Time and Space

What follows are guidelines for how to define a dedicated time and space for listening and storytelling, whether they happen in person or online.

1. Why a meeting? Why now? Just as you must consider why you're choosing to tell a specific story to another person or group of people, you must be able to answer why you're calling a meeting (as opposed to using other means of communication) and why at this particular time.

2. Create a dedicated time and space. Your priority now is to create a space for listening. Remember that listening begins with you. So think of the environment you need in order to listen yourself, and then think of who the listeners in the meeting will be. Make sure that the space will remain private throughout the length of the meeting. Is the room big enough to accommodate everyone? What is the noise level? Has the room been booked for an adequate amount of time? Is there enough light?

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3. Manage the time. Let people know that this meeting is going to be timed, and designate a dedicated timekeeper whose role is to make sure that everyone gets the same amount of time to speak, or alternatively, you can dedicate the time proportionally based on the emphasis of the meeting. If storytellers know that their story will reliably end after a certain number of minutes, they will be able to choose which elements of the story are the most important for them to communicate.

4. Identify and release obstacles to listening, and set an intention. When you start the meeting, go around the room and ask people to say what their obstacles to listening are in the moment. Then release the obstacles to listening. For example, if there's a construction crew outside with a jackhammer, close all windows or find another room to work from. Identifying and releasing the obstacles is not meant as suppression or rejection; it's about acknowledging and putting things aside so that everyone can get the most out of the meeting experience.

Finally, set an intention. Setting an intention calls you into a certain way of being, which is not the habitual way you may have of approaching a meeting. For instance, an intention may be one word or one sentence such as "Focus" or "My intention is to listen constructively to what is said in this meeting." By stating this intention, you are indicating to everyone in the group what kind of listener you're going to be for each one of them.

5. Designate dedicated listeners. The role of the designated listener is to listen openly, without judgment. She is also listening for the specificity of what's being said, according to the What happened? method. By designating someone as the dedicated listener, you know that there is someone whose listening you can count on to actively support and shape what you and others are going to say.

6. Instruct participants to tell what happened. Always ask What happened? no matter what the content of your communications. It will transform the way your meetings sound, and affect their outcomes because it will force you to identify and take out what is unnecessary — that is, your opinions, assumptions, interpretations and feelings about a situation. It's an editing tool for you to make your point more quickly and in a more straightforward way.

7. Record and share. Make sure what is said is recorded, whether through precise note-taking or through an electronic device. Designate someone to take notes and to share those notes with everyone. ●

Remember Your Heritage

Most people have fond memories of their grandparents. The Grandparent Exercise is a storytelling practice that simultaneously breaks the ice and allows people to get to know one another in a substantive manner. It is a powerful way of locating the personal story within a larger historical context in an intimate and emotional way.

There are two roles that are essential to conducting this exercise: the facilitator, who explains and leads the exercise, and the timekeeper, whose role is not only to keep time but also to support the facilitator in creating the listening space for the grandparent stories to emerge.

In this exercise, the group gives and receives the *gift of listening* to each person, and even when there are obstacles to listening, each group member will bring his or her listening back to the person who is speaking.

Participants have three minutes to present themselves as their grandparent. They speak in the first person "I" point of view, tell their name, and somewhere in the course of the story, tell when they were born and whether they are currently alive or have died.

The exercise is not about performance or delivery. It's about the listening, which is the safe container for your story and which will also shape the story that you tell. Once participants start speaking, the listening will take them in directions they cannot predict. Participants have three minutes each to tell their story.

After each story, the facilitator asks the group, "How was your listening? Were there any obstacles?" People may respond, "I was thinking about my story," or "I was thinking about how little I know about my grandparents." The facilitator acknowledges these obstacles by responding with, "You are now aware you have an obstacle because you have spoken it. You have acknowledged that it is there. Now let it go, hit the refresh button as you would on a computer, and bring yourself back to be fully present for the next story." The facilitator then moves on to the next person.

With teams, this exercise provides a means of connecting people to a sense of where they come from and simultaneously sharing that bit of background with their teammates. Liberated from the pressure to talk intimately about themselves, which is horribly uncomfortable for some, participants are nonetheless able to share a deeply personal relationship. For a group, the exercise creates a sense of unity in that having grandparents — whether or not one has ever known them — is a universal

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phenomenon. It naturally stimulates our sense of empathy and understanding.

In the context of the Narativ method, the Grandparent Exercise demonstrates that there is a reciprocal relationship between listening and telling; that listening is a gift; that everyone has a story; that everyone is equipped to tell a story; that basic storytelling principles can be applied by anyone; that a story can be constructed with fragments of memory and information; and that however much you protest you can't tell a story, you'll find it's a natural ability of your brain! ●

Tell What Happened

Telling a story according to the What happened? method means relating the actual events that occurred as they were seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. With this storytelling method, judgments, comments, opinions and critiques are excluded, and we instead rely entirely on our powers of factual description to take our listeners on a sensory expedition through the story's landscape. An easy rule of thumb for this method would be to say what actually happened, not what you thought or felt about what happened.

A creative analogy that assists in learning and perfecting the What happened? method is called the What happened? camera. According to the What happened? camera, the following are not facts. The camera cannot see these mental creations.

- **Feelings:** Emotions, reactions and vague beliefs.
- **Interpretations:** Explanations based largely on our own version of things.
- **Judgments:** The tendency to objectify, qualify or characterize someone based on our own proclivity for certain ways of thinking or viewing others.
- **Opinions:** Views or judgments not necessarily based on fact or knowledge; general beliefs.
- **Rationalizations:** Attempts to justify (an action or attitude) with logical reasoning.
- **Commentary:** The expression of opinions or offering of explanations about an event or situation.
- **Internal thoughts:** These include comments that begin "Well, I thought to myself" or "I said to myself." These are preambles to saying what happened. When you use the What happened? camera, you don't need these preambles.

When our feelings and interpretations about events are driving the show, they prevent our listeners from experiencing what happened for themselves. How can you be there when someone else is coloring the facts with his or her interpretation? When only the five sensory details are present, our audience can listen cleanly and openly. It gives space for their intelligence to assess the story's many elements.

Delivering a Wow Moment

A multinational medical insurance company was hit financially because of the negative reviews its customer service department was receiving online and in the media. Sparing no expense, the company brought in expert after expert in an attempt to fix the ongoing problem. Call center employees were given a set of principles that were deemed brand attributes to live by:

- Listen and learn from customers so that the customers' needs are at the heart of every decision.
- Deliver wow moments that matter.
- Always do the right thing.
- Listen to our customers.
- Be courageous and decisive.

Although the branding team patted themselves on the back for coming up with these attributes and principles, employees had no idea how to implement what amounted to a series of abstract concepts.

For the company to become more consumer-centric, the entire organization needed to undergo a radical cultural change in which everyone became a storyteller. "We all need to be storytellers" became the corporate mandate. Narativ representatives went to the call centers and talked to the managers and reps who speak to customers every day. The goal was to elicit their stories and share them widely to help teams be more customer-centric.

Among hundreds of managers in call centers all over the world, one story in particular stuck out. Charlie, a manager, had received an escalated call, which meant that the customer had not been satisfied by any of the customer service responses she'd received so far. This is Charlie's What happened? story:

"It was a Monday night about 5:30, and I was just getting ready to leave work. I got a call from a woman named Mona. She wanted a list of therapists for her husband, Henry.

'What kind of therapist does he need? What condition does he need to be treated for?'

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Mona responded, 'My husband is crazy, and he needs help. He's been diagnosed with sleep apnea, but he refuses to get the machine.'

As I was talking to her, I could hear him in the background, 'If you're talking to the insurance company, hang up. It's \$1,200 for a machine I'm never gonna use.'

I asked, 'Why is he so resistant to getting a CPAP machine?'

She said she needed to go into a different room to talk. 'His father died of cancer while on a respirator. This machine looks like a respirator to him, and he's not gonna get it.'

I said, 'I have sleep apnea too, and I have used a CPAP machine for many years. And I'm still here.'

Mona said, 'You know, I really want you to talk to my husband. I want you to tell him what you're telling me.' She put him on the phone.

Henry told me that the Packers were playing the Bears and that I was taking him away from the game. First thing I said in response was, 'I'm a Bears fan.'

Henry said, 'Well, that's not a good start. I'm a Packers fan.'

I took a breath, and I told him that Reggie White, who was an all-pro defensive player Hall of Famer, died from sleep apnea five years after retiring from professional football.

Now Henry took a breath and said, 'I can't ignore this.'

Oh, and by the way, his CPAP machine was covered 100 percent, so it wouldn't cost him anything. He said he would get the machine on one condition. 'You have to say, Go, Pack, go!'

I said, 'You know what? If this will help you, absolutely: Go, Pack, go!'

For businesses, a What happened? story promotes the mission and goals of a company in such a way that they are graspable and memorable and powerful. When Charlie shared his story with fellow call center employees, he embodied those values and goals, and everyone immediately understood what it meant to "deliver wow moments" and "listen to customers." They saw that they could actively create a more customer-oriented culture.

By saying what happened and detailing the facts of your experience, you can bring yourself and others into a clearer picture of events without clouding their listening with the language of emotions. This brings our communication forward, allowing emotions their place but not allowing them to tangle up what we want to say. Notice the distinction here: we allow the emotions to come up; we identify them; but then we release them and don't allow them to direct us. ●

Find Your Ending

The success of a story depends largely on its structure. Through the What happened? method, you plot out the details. At that point, your story is simply a succession of What happened? moments. To become a satisfying story, those moments will have to be shaped into three parts: beginning, emotional turning point and ending.

Every story has an arc. Ending a story can be likened to landing a plane. Like the pilot who must know how to descend, precisely where to land and come to a full standstill, the storyteller must guide the audience toward the conclusion and bring the story to a significant end. In between is the flight itself, and though no one likes turbulence, a bumpy ride does make for a better story. Just so, your story will be more captivating when you've identified your emotional turning point.

Where to begin. If the very first sentence (or two) of your story captures our attention, then we, your listeners, will follow you wherever your story takes us. Take the lead, know where you're going and we'll go with you. In fact, we'll want to go with you. A strong beginning is always a What happened? beginning.

With your first line you can choose to drop us right in the middle of the action. Being dropped into the middle of a story sparks our curiosity because we are not given a context. We do not know quite what is going on, and the mystery of it makes us want to know what happens next. Example: "My wife turned around and picked up the phone. 'It's for you. She says she's a headhunter.'"

The emotional turning point. In traditional dramatic structure, a conflict or obstacle arises that the main character somehow has to overcome or resolve. It's what everyone's silently anticipating when you begin a story, and it will be the surefire way to make your message or meaning stick.

Conflict connotes your struggle to achieve your goal. It can just as easily be funny, touching, moving or violent. Remember, we want to see transformation in your story. Something changes; you as the lead character transform, even if it is a subtle change. Conflict is inherently dramatic.

When structuring your story, moments of conflict are turning points — the places where the story changes direction.

Ending. As you are excavating and crafting your story, the ending may not be immediately clear. That's okay. Although sometimes you are dead sure of where you want to end, in most cases the ending emerges from the story-creation process. The important thing to keep in

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mind is that you are seeking an experience in which the emotions of your conflict are released. That will give you an ending that delivers, that lands and that recapitulates the rationale for your story in one short moment. ●

Connect With Your Audience

From the moment you ask the questions *Why story? Why now?*, you have begun thinking about your relationship with an audience. Every subsequent step in Narativ's method is oriented toward optimizing your creation of a connection with your audience.

Having excavated your story and crafted a beginning, emotional turning point and end, you are ready to present. The best way to learn how to present is to do it. Offer people your story. Then ask them if they are willing to listen. If the answer is yes, then you are bound into a listening and storytelling contract. What follows are guidelines and principles for presentation.

Connect to your body. A story lives in your body. Your body remembers your story, and therefore your body is an instrument of telling. As part of your preparation for telling, it's important to search your body for tension that may interfere.

Connect to the space. In presentation, you are always working with *proprioception*, which is defined as the instinctive perception of the position and movements of the body. To begin, think about the space in which you might tell your story. Allow yourself to begin to inhabit that space mentally. Often when we present, we tend to cling to the podium like a barnacle. There is a certain mythology about presentation and standing in the front of the room with little movement — as if that's the only way to hold everyone's attention! Break free of that restriction. The room is yours to use, and how you use it plays a role in how you connect with your audience. Every choice you make is about commanding attention.

Identify and release obstacles to listening. Reapply the technique of identifying and releasing obstacles as you prepare for presentation. These include obstacles you might encounter in the room itself. Is it too hot or cold? Too bright or dark? You have to take in all potential obstacles and release them so that you are not caught off guard by your reactions to them when you begin to tell your story. You also want to minimize listening obstacles for your audience.

Presentation is being present with your body and story onstage. *Connection* is what we're aiming for. Consider these presentation rules of thumb:

- 1. Before you begin speaking,** connect to your body, establish your feet firmly on the ground, breathe naturally and remember the story in your body.
- 2. Maintain eye contact with your audience.** Throughout the presentation, establish individual eye contact with five or six people.
- 3. Slow down.** If you talk too fast, you'll lose your listeners. This applies to most people: slow down the tempo even if it feels unnatural. This is where practice and preparation are crucial.
- 4. Pay attention to volume.** If possible, present without a microphone. But make sure that the people in the back row can hear you.
- 5. End with confidence and poise.** Allow your story to conclude with a final standstill. Stay poised and keep eye contact with the audience as you allow the effect of the story to wash over them.

Now share your story. Connect with your body. Connect with your story. Connect with your listeners.

Keep listening to the stories that are told to you as a result of telling yours. Let those stories permeate the fabric of your being and that of your business. Enjoy the ripple effect that you will experience as a result of sharing your stories with others and listening to theirs. Allow yourself and your communication to be transformed. ●

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