RE-AUTHORING
THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL
AND HOSPITALITY

AN UNFOLDING PRACTICE IN TOURISM FLANDERS

GRIET BOUWEN,
MARIANNE SCHAPMANS &
CHENÉ SWART
RE-AUTHORING THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

AN UNFOLDING PRACTICE IN TOURISM FLANDERS

GRIET BOUWEN, MARIANNE SCHAPMANS & CHENÉ SWART

TOERISMEVLANDEREN
COLOFON

This article has been translated and adapted from various published documents: Connect your story manual, Re-authoring Futures Con-Texts and several articles published on www.verbindjeverhaal.be. It is published on www.connectyourstory.org and www.iedereenverdientvakantie.be

2018 © All rights reserved.

For the text: Griet Bouwen, Chené Swart & Marianne Schapmans
For the design: info@llot.be
Re-authoring the future of travel and hospitality

AN UNFOLDING PRACTICE IN TOURISM FLANDERS
Griet Bouwen,
Marianne Schapmans &
Chené Swart

In this chapter we tell the story of a future in travel and hospitality that is being re-authored as we speak. This story is currently unfolding in the governmental office of Tourism Flanders (Visit Flanders) and its Holiday Participation Centre. Appreciative Inquiry, Generative Journalism and the Re-authoring work collaborated to facilitate transformational ways of seeing and being that re-ignited the dignity of all who participate in creating possibilities for people to travel and to host travellers. Together we will explore the practices of listening, writing and sharing of real-life stories that re-author the future of travel.

Re-authoring the future of travel and hospitality is an exciting movement that will inspire you, spark your imagination for the futures you would like to re-author, give you the tools and practises to embark on your own journey and also show you how you can be part of this movement.
Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote in his Meditations that it is not death that people should fear, but that they should fear never beginning to live. This experience of being fully alive can overwhelm us when we travel. Immersing ourselves in the sounds, smells and tastes of new places sharpen our senses and, in a way, they remind us vividly that what we feel is pure, pure life!

When we travel, we move away from the domestic life. We put on a new set of eyes, ears and a sensitive skin for what surrounds us. On our way to the top of a mountain, we can feel our hearts pumping, our feet prickle. Watching someone fearlessly surfing the waves, we might feel the desire to try something we have never dared before. While cycling in the middle of a remarkable landscape, our unexpected tears make a reverence to Mother Earth.

Or, we could become more attuned to smaller experiences. After a few weeks of hiking in a snowy landscape in France, one of us saw herself in the mirror one morning. She saw a peaceful human being with the skin colour that told a story of strong health, energy and joy. She said to herself: ‘darling, this is what you look like when you feel calm and healthy. This is the beautiful image of being fully alive.’

So, there she was. In the middle of what Heidegger would call ‘Spielraum’: a time and place where we as human beings can consider the life we lead and the possible changes that can be made. Because people are meaning making beings we are, from time to time, faced with the question of what an authentic life could be for us, Heidegger says. Because of our vision on working with stories, we would add to the philosopher’s vision that we are not only meaning-makers,
PEOPLE ARE NOT ONLY MEANING-MAKERS, BUT ALSO STORYMAKERS. WE CONNECT EXPERIENCES AND MAKE STORIES THAT HOLD CONCLUSIONS ABOUT WHO WE ARE, WHAT OUR LIFE IS ABOUT AND HOW THE WORLD IS.
but also story-makers. We connect experiences and make stories that hold conclusions about who we are, what our life is about and how the world is.

So, let’s dig a bit deeper into this idea of story-making and meaning-making. Could it help to season our everyday lives with the spices and flavours of our travel experiences? Alain De Botton, an English philosopher said that tourism can grant people an understanding of what life might be about outside the constraints of work and the struggle for survival. We think he has a good point: What if travelling has a partner that joins the ride, namely, reflection?

In surveys on transformational tourism, it became clear that reflection is a lever for transformation. People who journal, take time to think about their adventures or have deep conversations about it, report more often that travelling changes their life. And this is where the narrative work comes alongside Heidegger’s Spielraum.

If we host a Spielraum where people are asked to reflect on moments while travelling, hosting or even contributing to travelling opportunities for others, we create a space for deeper thoughts and surprising insights. And there is more: if we document these stories, we add another layer of meaning to people’s experiences. As we pour our energy into this dedicated work of writing stories, we can share them in a larger context: a network of travellers and travel-facilitators, a broader public of policy-makers and public opinion. Then, something can start to shift.

By finding stories, listening carefully to people’s experiences, exploring insights, documenting and sharing stories in networks, we slowly shift towards a broadened
image on what travelling and hosting really means to people and communities. We move away from a dominant economic vision on tourism. We move into a vision that reveals the possible contribution of tourism and travelling to wellbeing, sustainability, and becoming fully alive. And, most of all: we connect people around this topic and inspire them to deepen their actions in creating opportunities for others to enjoy the benefits of a holiday.

If we host a Spielraum where people are asked about moments while travelling, hosting or even contributing to travelling opportunities for others, we create a space for deeper thoughts and surprising insights.

That is what we have discovered in an ongoing experiment at the Holiday Participation Centre in Flanders. In the following pages, we dive deeper into our six years of practice with story work around travel and hospitality in this network. But first, let’s introduce you to this unique network:

THE HOLIDAY PARTICIPATION CENTRE IN FLANDERS: WHY AND HOW?

Societal challenges such as poverty, integration, social exclusion, loneliness, inclusion, aging and health care are often so complex that one organization or policy domain cannot tackle them on their own. These are complex issues that require the knowledge and effort of a whole society. An
invigorating holiday or a pleasant day trip with the family is not a miraculous solution to get out of poverty or social isolation, but it is a step in the right direction and part of the answer. A holiday creates space in the lives of vulnerable people who are often faced with severe difficulties.

By making a vacation possible, we are giving a space to breathe again, the courage to carry on and a sense of equality and freedom. This is an important investment in the potential of people in poverty.

Poverty has a huge impact on people’s leisure time. The EU-SILC survey of the FPS Economy shows that one in four Belgians cannot afford a week’s vacation. In Brussels this figure goes up to 40%. People who struggle to make ends meet feel compelled to focus on their basic needs. There is usually no money or energy left to enjoy life and people in these circumstances quickly get the feeling that they cannot keep up. Even their children fall out of the boat.

Because of exclusion, people in poverty have less opportunities to build a social network and therefore have a limited amount of contacts to draw on. They are ashamed, shut themselves off and end up in a negative spiral. As a society we have to offer opportunities also to experience enjoyable things. By making a vacation possible, we are giving a space to breathe again, the courage to carry on and a sense of equality and freedom. This is an important investment in the potential of people in poverty.
The Holiday Participation Centre facilitates a unique collaboration

In 2001, Tourism Flanders decided to take action in preventing social exclusion. The Holiday Participation Centre started with their ambitious mission to bring people in poverty out of their homes and the daily grind of their lives. They set up a public private partnership and asked operators of tourist attractions and holiday accommodation to offer discounts. In addition, social organizations were encouraged to invite people to make use of the offer, to provide appropriate guidance and to ensure that the discount only reaches people who live below the poverty line. Transport companies were also asked to provide their social rates.

It is now 17 years later and the network ‘Everyone Deserves A Holiday’, facilitated by the Holiday Participation Centre, has more than 2 400 partners, consisting of 660 tourism entrepreneurs and 1750 social organizations. Thanks to their powerful cooperation, every year more than 150,000 people in poverty can go on day trips or short holiday breaks in Flanders.

This is the result of a unique collaboration wherein all the partners have committed themselves with full conviction. But this kind of fertile network does not fall from the sky and neither can it be sustained without support. It needs a motivator and inspirator to keep the work going. Tourism Flanders has taken on that role of connector that coordinates the commitments and efforts of all partners in the network ‘Everyone Deserves A Holiday’.
Lifting cooperation above a win-win logic

How do you align all of these partners? And how do you ensure that this network remains solution-oriented and ambitious? Working together is extremely fascinating and enriching, but it is not easy. When numerous different perspectives of people and organizations come together, it becomes a risk that one logic threatens to take over and then the diversity gets lost or the cooperation breaks up through disagreements.

The network Everyone Deserves A Holiday has managed to write a new story together with the partners and to formulate a shared ambition. There is room for everyone’s expertise, ideas and logic. The classical thinking in win-win relationships has been abandoned because in these double-win relationships, cooperation revolves around the following idea: I do something for you, you do something for me and we both win or are better off. In a triple-win relationship, another dimension is added: when we work together, something new is created that is greater than our own separate interests. The effects of this triple-win relationship become wider, broader and more people become involved. The joint forces are bundled together without having one direct benefit for either the partners or the broader social context.

The glue in this network is the attention for appreciative practices. Appreciating what partners do, showing who the partners are and not forcing anyone to cooperate. Participation in this network is voluntary. It’s about listening carefully and being as helpful as possible, looking for connections and looking for what is needed.
The Tourism Flanders team supports the efforts of all partners, links their initiatives, links questions and solutions with one another, preserves the big picture and fume the flames of energy. They create opportunities where people can discover one another’s expertise, can learn together and set up partnerships. They communicate widely about the efforts of all partners and the results that can therefore be achieved.

Story work in the Holiday Participation Centre

An important tool in connecting, supporting and communicating, is stories. With a continuous stream of stories (2 stories per week, shared via www.verbindjeverhaal and social media) the network keeps drawing attention to initiatives, evolutions and people with passion who help to promote the right to a holiday. Through the collecting and sharing of stories, the immeasurable is made visible. These stories are not an end product, but rather an infectious spark that creates new possibilities for the narrator, the network and the wider audience that reads these stories. They show what lives in the network and also show new insights. They bring about energy and connection. The stories of vacationers and the integrated experiences of partners give concrete handles in discussions with policy makers. Authentic stories have special power. They confirm the right of human experiences to exist, they connect, clarify, enthuse and bring things into motion. They make tangible what cannot be expressed in numbers. They give complex themes a face and make them comprehensible, human and real. Without the small stories there would be no bigger story.
How does the network, Everyone Deserves A Holiday, work with stories? How did this work come about? Where do we stand now and in which direction have the story work evolved? You will discover more about the answers to these questions in the following sections:

**METHODOLOGIES UNDERPINNING THE STORY WORK IN THE HOLIDAY PARTICIPATION CENTRE**

In 2011 during the annual large-scale network meeting, called the Forum, important questions emerged: 'How do we manage to keep the network connected throughout the year? How do we bring everyone's hopes, ideas and initiatives to the surface so that we can reap the benefits together?' These questions were the start of an experiment that grew into a vertebra in the backbone of the network.

As a result, the Holiday Participation Centre of Tourism Flanders started experimenting with stories in 2012. After all, the large network of tourism entrepreneurs, social organizations and people who, despite limitations (financial, social, physical) found their way to a vacation, was bursting with stories. A dedicated storytaker listens to vacationers, volunteers and professionals by asking open and curious questions about holiday experiences, ideas and dreams. She helps people give meaning to their experiences and gives them a platform where their stories can shine and inspire others.

Within six years, more than five hundred stories were collected about holiday experiences. We look these stories up, ask questions, listen carefully and write the stories down.
Then we share those pearls in the network. We bring the stories together on www.verbindjeverhaal and share them via social media, print and newsletters. We read the stories in public and use them in publications. The collection of stories continues to grow and offers a wonderful insight into hundreds of experiences about holidays and the meanings that people give to their holidays. Together these stories tell an alternative story about how - close to home - the experience of holidays for people living in poverty contributes to a dignified existence.

The methodical roots of the story work at Everyone Disserves A Holiday lies with Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a philosophy and methodology that is mainly used in organizational development. For the concrete application of AI to find and share stories with a view of strengthening connections and innovative capacity in the network, we found inspiration at the Canadian Axiomnews. They developed a specific form of journalistic work, which they called Generative Journalism. From the beginning, both visions and methodical processes formed the basis for the approach to start the story work. A few years later, the ideas and practices of the Re-authoring work was added. In the following sections we will explain how these three approaches support our story work.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a way of looking at people and groups from the perspective of what works well. AI is primarily a process, an activity of inquiry, discovery and development. The origin of this work is in Cleveland, Ohio, at Case Western Reserve University and the founders include Suresh Srivastva, David Cooperrider, Ronald Fry
and Frank Barrett. Appreciative inquiry is essentially an activity that people undertake together to bring about change in themselves and in the groups of which they are a part.

**AI-PRINCIPLES**

Six principles underpin the approach and inspire the story work at Everyone Disserves A Holiday:

**Principle 1:** Outspokenly choosing the perspective of strengths
The basis for development lies in discovering and appreciating what is already good. Seeing the past and present as a source of possibility rather than problems is providing recognition and safety to step into adventures of change. The appreciative glance is a choice: we can ask every person, in every situation, any question and go on an inquiry. What you discover depends on the questions you ask. If you look for deficits, then you will find what you are looking for. If you seek strengths, then it will come to the forefront.

**Principle 2:** Stories create coherence
A story is a coherent set of events and experiences that are meaningful to the narrator. Stories tell about what someone did, what it felt like, who was there, what others did and what influences played a role in the background. A story creates coherence, so that the content of what people think, find, fear or hope can come and stand in a new and fuller light.

**Principle 3:** People grow in relationship with one another
Our practice shows that choosing for an appreciative perspective contributes in an astonishing way to high quality relationships among one another. Appreciation
is an activity between people. It is about recognizing the best that is already there, between people and in the world around us. The effect: people feel recognized and valued. What is good becomes clear and possibilities become visible. This is a stepping-stone to strong relationships in which dialogue and cooperation can germinate.

**Principle 4: The future pulls us forward**
Attractive and credible visions of the future move people into action. Striving for something attractive inspires us much more than getting rid of something that is annoying. Prospect, hope, joy and inspiration give people energy to make plans and to spring into action.

**Principle 5: Words create reality**
People shape reality by giving words to it. Talking to each other is about the exchanging of words which gradually originates into meaning. Talking with each other therefore also means making something together: a collective image of reality. ‘Our’ reality originates when together we find agreement and together we give meaning to our words and what we see. The choice of our words gives more direction than we usually realize. If we use positive and enlivened language, our conversations become vibrant, rooted in the concrete existence which is hope filled.

**Principle 6: A question sets the change in motion**
A question is an intervention that focuses attention on something. Attention sets development in motion. In fact, attention is energy that, as a seed, directs our thoughts and actions. That is why it is so important to formulate our questions with care and to take into account the principles mentioned above. Good questions seek
strength, elicit stories and are formulated in positive, enlivened and attractive language.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS METHODICAL PROCESS

The methodology of Appreciative Inquiry consists of a cycle of four steps: discovering (what is already strong today), imagining (what does the future look like if it is built on strengths), designing (which path can we follow then) and realizing (how are we going to do that and what is needed for this). The process always revolves around a core theme. We also use these steps in our conversations with storytellers.

Generative Journalism

Generative Journalism is an extraordinary interpretation of journalism, developed by Peter Pula, CEO of Canadian Axiomnews. He invites the journalistic world to intentionally take responsibility for what we create with what we call ‘news’. We met Peter Pula at the AI World Conference in Ghent, 2012, and quickly began to implement these ideas as we wanted to give this way of working a chance in the network Everyone Deserve A Holiday.

For the Axiomnews (www.axiomnews.com) team, a news item is not the end result of a journalistic process alone, but a stepping stone to the future. News that is published always does ‘something’: it affects people, in whatever way. It focuses attention, and what gets a lot of attention, will grow faster than what gets less attention.
Making news is therefore never without obligation. Every news item has the potential to affect something, both in the ‘subject’ of the news and its readers. Peter Pula therefore calls this work ‘generative journalism’: it has the potential to generate next steps towards a future we hope for.

News can cause movement in the direction that we want. Through the publishing of an abundance of personal and practical stories, generative journalism shows what is already present when it comes to strength, talent and passion and how, from this place, an attractive future can emerge. Readers discover what is already working and how they can also get moving. The source of the news - the person being interviewed - experiences recognition and encouragement.

Each news item is the result of an appreciative inquiring contact between a journalist and a person from the stakeholder network (of a client) who knows and/or does or wants to do something interesting. This is not just ‘news gathering’. Together with the person it is a search that looks for the essence of what he/she does, wants to do or knows. It is a search for hope and pride, and the promise that lurks in the experience waiting to also inspire and activate others.

What is the contribution that generative news makes? Employees, customers and all stakeholders get a voice in the bigger picture. With this, inclusive and co-creative organising comes closer. People in and around an organisation or network also start moving in the direction of a prosperous future. Generative news inspires them, encourages creativity and motivates the discovery and utilization of opportunities. Consciousness, understanding and appreciation for people who take initiative, grows.
Gradually, the perspective with which people look at life and work changes, they discover opportunities, cultivate pride, connection and mutual support.

Re-authoring work

At the next Appreciative Inquiry world conference in 2015, Johannesburg, we met Chené Swart who studied narrative therapy. She discovered how narrative ideas and practices can contribute to the work with communities and organizations and wrote a book called “Re-authoring the world: The narrative lens and practices for organizations, communities and individuals.” Her ideas made us curious. We felt that something magical was happening in the process of listening to and documenting authentic, often alternative stories of ordinary people. The narrative work held the promise to understand the effects of our work on a deeper level. In this discovery, the re-authoring work added more philosophical and methodical foundations to the work that was unfolding.

What is re-authoring work?

Re-authoring work creates a context in which people can once again give meaning to significant moments in their lives: moments that are often seen as an exception, unimportant or too ordinary. These meaningful moments are then woven into their lives in a way that creates new possibilities for conclusions about identity, relationships and the future.

Where does the re-authoring work come from?

'Re-authoring therapy' was the original description that the founders Michael White and David Epston (1990) used for their work before it was later called narrative therapy. The
work is influenced by currents in postmodern philosophy: post-structuralism (Foucault), deconstructivism (Derrida), social-constructionism (Gergen), critical pedagogy (Ferreira), cultural anthropology (Geertz) and literary theory.

How does re-authoring work see people?
The re-authoring work sees people as meaning makers and storymakers of significant moments in their lives. Moments are seen as the smallest unit of experience (Zimmerman 2018). Because we give meaning to our experiences, moments are strung together into a story. These stories are very powerful, since they shape and maintain the identity, relationships, lives, history, future and reality of people.

Re-authoring ideas sees identity as socially co-constructed by the context, cultural background, relationships and history of each person. Therefore, a person cannot be seen as a fixed identity and this work always unpacks the extent to which people’s identity conclusions fit in with the hopes and dreams for their lives.

Our identity is thus formed within a social context, in which generally accepted ideas present themselves as facts and truths about our lives. In this respect we can see narrative therapy as work in the field of social justice, because it is always aware of the dominant contextual ideas and their influence on people. The same applies to power relations that creep into conversations. This work stands next to people who experience injustice and does not work from a position of ‘knowing about’ or ‘making decisions for’ others.
As a result of this dignified view of people, a person is never seen as the problem. But the problem is the problem. People are therefore in a relationship to problem moments in their lives. The problem never has the last word, because there are always alternative moments that stand in contrast with problem moments in people’s lives.

This view, and the nature of the questions we ask, bring important relationships and moments in the lives of people back into their stories. This enables people to live again from the ‘forgotten’ dreams, skills and values of their lives.

**What are re-authoring practices?**

Re-authoring practices consist of: the externalization of problems, a transformative questioning and listening attitude, an appreciation for the creation of documents about the identity of a person, the use of the vocabulary of the person we are listening to, a focus on unique moments and alternative stories and finally the deconstruction of power.

**What does re-authoring work do?**

This way of listening to stories enables listeners to ignite the beauty, dignity and honour of the narrator again. Both the narrator and the listener are therefore ‘transported’ to new insights, new experiences and new connections.

**Re-authoring work strengthens our work with stories**

We started working with the vision and practices of the Re-authoring work, laying it as an extra foundation for our work with stories. Our conversations with storytellers continued to deepen, and we witnessed more than once a process in which people discovered new layers of meaning and possibilities in their stories.
Emerging insights in six years of dedicated story work

From the end of 2012 up to and including 2015, we experimented with Appreciative Inquiry and Generative Journalism in the network Everyone Deserves A Holiday. In the beginning we published three stories every week, which we mainly wrote after telephone conversations with storytellers. Gradually we discovered that in face-to-face meetings with storytellers a valuable depth was achieved, and we chose to continue further on this path. The meetings became more intense, the stories became richer. From 2014 we published two stories per week. We further deepened the practice of listening, writing and sharing story by story. We especially discovered the power of a good conversation and were touched by how working with stories gives people the experience of being seen and how encouragement comes from publishing their authentic stories. Which effects did we gradually determine?

What were the effects that we saw?
The team at VISITFLANDERS experiences a deeper connection with the mission of their work when they are surrounded by real-life stories from people who - despite their confrontation with limitations – experience a holiday. The team members discovered story after story to what and whom they are dedicating their work. Each story gives them insight into the effects of holidays on the lives of people in poverty, on their relationships with family and friends, on their experience of connectedness with society - precisely because they have access to holidays. Every new story is an opportunity for the team to be inspired and motivated again, because the stories whisper about values and hopes for the future. The valuable collection
of stories also gives direction to the team in their work to make holidays even more accessible to everyone.

Professionals in the network, Everyone Deserves A Holiday - tourism entrepreneurs, community workers, social workers and policy makers - can discover which projects, ideas, hopes and dreams are alive in the network. Whilst reading the stories from colleagues and vacationers, they find inspiration for their work. They discover with whom they can collaborate and how other network partners can strengthen their work. When holiday makers talk about their dreams for the future and their wishes for the society at large, they reconnect with their passions and with what drives them. This gives energy and fuels the fire. Then we see people acting on the basis of what they told as their hopes and ambitions.

Each story enriches our understanding of the essential meaning of holidays. It is an enlivening way to do an inquiry, a form of inquiry that is not ‘outside’ the field but stands in the midst of it. This way of inquiry does not only look ‘at’ the field, but also develops this field of work: because every in-depth conversation with people, every written and shared story influences the reality and what can become possible in that reality.

Every story is the result of relations between a narrator and a listener wherein dignity can be confirmed or restored. By embracing the Re-authoring approach from 2015, we see a story-based work that not only focuses on communication and connection in the network, not only offers learning and cooperation opportunities, but also builds towards a world in which human dignity is restored. And yes, perhaps the most important outcome is that people - often people who feel excluded in society – have been seen and have seen
themselves anew. They have been recognized, accepted and seen in their experiences, wisdom and hope. These people have experienced that they indeed have a voice. In this way, the story work contributes to the re-dignifying of people.

Building towards dignity, and how?
Firstly: we do not invent or make up stories. We go out and look for real-life experiences of people. We are not looking for ‘the big story’, nor for exceptional achievements or experiences. We simply make contact and discover the richness in the real life of real people. We have a good, in-depth conversation with people in poverty, people that are differently abled, volunteers and professionals. We talk about who they are, about their lives, about their holiday experiences and their dreams for the future. We do not shy away from difficult stories. When we hear these kind of stories, we try to find the desire and the strength behind the difficulties. We want to understand how holiday experiences offer people strength and strategies to cope with and overcome what is difficult in their lives. Our conversations are warm, thoughtful, encouraging and affirming of what is.

Secondly: the story worker writes the story. She/he brings structure into these life experiences and puts a spotlight on the underlying meaning. Then she/he sends the first text to the storyteller with the question: is it a true reflection? Does this story tell about what is really meaningful to you? Does it tell it in a way that is respectful and suitable to be made visible in the network? In this phase people discover that their story has worth in the world, that they are valued as a person with meaningful experiences, hopes and dreams. A written story is also a document that holds an appreciating mirror up for people.
To see their words, doubts, hopes and experiences on paper, written by someone who listened to them, is often a powerful experience that deeply anchors their hope and brings people to insight and action.

Thirdly: we publish the story and distribute it in the network. The experience that my story is worth sharing, that it is authentic and beautiful, that it contains exactly the words that I want to use, that my narrated story is structured in a meaningful way: that is a deep, powerful experience. People then start to share their story in their own networks. We see people starting to act on the basis of what they told as their hopes and ambitions. We see people being ‘seen’ by their environment, that their way of being is better understood, that they receive empathy, understanding and often even help.

Fourthly: We realize that this is work of dignity and re-dignifying. This is ‘re-authoring’ work. Our work helps people to ‘re-write’ their experiences: with more depth and a broader sense of meaning and preferred conclusions. Away from thin and superficial holiday stories, to colourful experiences full of values, strengths, hopes and possibilities. We believe that through this kind of story work people become more aware of the richness of their personal experiences. We see how the eyes of people start to shine when they discover new experiences and insights that ultimately influence their choices and the visions of their life. Through this process of listening to stories, documenting and sharing, a treasure chest of rich identity conclusions opens up. Storytellers become more aware of who they are as a person, how they are connected to others and what gifts they have to offer to the world.
This work is extraordinary. Valuable. Humanizing. In 2017 we therefore decided to give this work an extra push. We wanted to deepen, spread and invite other people to become part of this work of dignity and re-dignifying. This work became ‘Storyweaving’. From 2018 we invited Storyweavers to cooperate with us on the international level in the re-authoring of travel and hospitality. That’s why we came up with the Connect Your Story project.

THE BIRTH OF STORYWEAVING: A DEDICATED DIGNIFYING PRACTICE

In our practice of finding, enriching and sharing stories for the past six years, we learned that story work is patient: it is important, but almost never urgent. Without people who are devoted to finding, listening to and sharing stories, this work is hardly ever launched, because it requires attention and time, which is scarce in our working environments. That is why we appointed a dedicated story maker; whose assignment is to give the stories in the network all the space they need. But what do we call such a person whose dedication goes to the dignity practice of finding, enriching, documenting and sharing stories? The usual terms such as ‘journalist’, ‘author’, ‘writer’ or ‘storyteller’ fell short of a sufficient description. Moreover, we place the conclusive authorship not so much with the writer but with the narrator of the story. A storyteller is the person who tells his or her story. He or she is and stays the owner of the story.
In 2017, we started calling the listener-documenter a ‘storyweaver’: someone who carefully helps to weave every story that has been listened to into the life of the storytellers and the network in which this story resounds. A storyweaver understands the powerful impact of stories and the context from where these stories originate. She, or he, creates spaces in which people can take up the pen again and be the primary author who shapes their own stories. A storyweaver is carefully curious about people. A storyweaver wants to learn from the stories people tell about who they are, what they experience, what they believe in and how they view the world. A storyweaver helps stories to be born and weaves them into the lives of narrators and the community. These stories can show alternatives, encourage others and create new opportunities.

This work is important in our world today, because the wisdom and knowledge of ordinary people - usually without status and without a voice - is often not seen and is not heard. Stories that are not heard do not resound and are not included in decisions: in communities, organisations and society at large. The more stories we discover and document, the more diversity will be recorded in these stories and as a result the story of our world and our reality can become richer. And the richer our understanding of reality becomes, the more we can inspire towards transformation. In this way, storyweavers collectively participate in weaving an alternative world, in which the lives of people who are
connected stand in the centre. Where the lives and voices of all people are equal in shaping and transforming our world. A storyweaver helps stories to be born and weaves them into the lives of narrators and the community.

Ways of doing and being as a storyweaver

An already moved heart (Carlson and Swart 2015-2017)
When we as storyweavers want to create the space where the dignity of the narrator can show up in the conversation, it is important that we come to the conversation with an ‘already moved heart’. A heart that is already moved and ready to be touched, a heart that is already open to the beauty, dignity and aliveness that we will meet. Such an already moved heart focuses on love, respect, compassion and the firm belief to always hold on to hope in the conversation.

Creating the atmosphere
Storyweavers create an atmosphere in which people can tell about moments that are of great significance to them. In this atmosphere we build a platform for human dignity, relationships and community. We create atmosphere by being attentive to the right place, the right time, and a wealth of deep connections.

Focus on connection
An appropriate atmosphere for a good conversation starts when we greet each other and connect before we dive into the content (Block 2008). Greeting and connection means that we are being attentive to who is with you. Who is this person? In which community does she/he live? We are inspired by a greeting that is customary to the Zulu people who greet with the words: ‘Sawubona’. That means: I see you. ‘You’ means much more than what we usually mean
in individualistic societies. With ‘Sawubona’ we also see each other in the richness of our history, our soil, our relationships.

**Asking transporting questions**
We greet, connect and invite stories through questions. In our questions, we pay attention to the identity of the other person, the community of the other person and their relationship with the world. Transporting questions are surprising, they make people think and remember and help people find words for things that might not have been so clear to them.

**Embodied knowings (Carlson and Swart 2015-2017)**
When we tell our stories - and are listened to - new insights, understanding, images, connections and possibilities are created and become visible. These discoveries touch and move us. We then reflect on the movement that we see and feel. The knowledges that emerge from these reflections originate from experiences and deep connection and can be described as “embodied knowledge”.

**The exchanging of gifts (Block 2008)**
In working with stories, we pay attention to giving ‘gifts’ back and forth. The listener tells what touches him or her in listening to the stories of the other person. And he/she invites the narrator to do the same. Gifts are not compliments, or positive judgments. A gift tells about how our hearts have been touched and moved by listening to the story of the other.

**Re-dignifying practices (Carlson and Swart 2015-2017)**
In order to make every conversation a podium of human dignity, the ‘re-dignifying practices’ are central. These
practices give the storytelling rights back to the people we listen to.

The re-dignifying practices go back to the original Latin meaning of the word ‘respect’. The word for respect originates from the words to ‘look at’ (specere) and ‘looking back at’ (re-specere). Looking back or seeing again means seeing without judgment and presumed knowledge of the other, which has often become a generally accepted practice.

The re-dignifying practices consist of being carefully curious (instead of judgments), asking questions to which you do not know answers (rather than assuming), using the narrator’s language in your questions (instead of giving advice), being open to be transformed (instead of wanting to solve things) and giving gifts.

In a world where people are often bombarded with questions and interrogations, and in which questions are asked that have a ‘right’ answer, the re-dignifying practices help to restore the balance. Storyweavers are not parents, teachers, recruitment agents, journalists or researchers who have a correct answer in mind. The re-dignifying practices help us to take nothing for granted, to not fill in words for the other person and, on the contrary, to always keep the narrator’s authorship at the centre.
WILD DREAM FOR THE FUTURE: LET’S CONNECT STORIES!

2012 now lies more than six years behind us. What started out as an experiment grew into a core practice in the network Everyone Disserves A Holiday. Gradually we have broadened our experiments to the edge of the Flemish network. Our first generation storyweavers have attended several conferences where academics and professionals from the international community around tourism and leisure have gathered. At these conferences we have also listened to stories about holiday experiences and how we can make holidays possible for people who have fewer opportunities to go on a holiday.

This work has been welcomed with much enthusiasm. People who told us their stories said how valuable it was for them to remember through the telling why they are so passionate about their work in the tourism industry. The work stood out at the UNWTO, the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations. Tourism Flanders was invited to think about the start-up of an international collection of stories. Administrator General, Peter De Wilde of Tourism Flanders, responded enthusiastically and supportively. Former Secretary General of UNWTO, Taleb Rifai accepted the patronage of the project and launched the start of the international stories collection Connectyourstory.org in Ghent.

The goal of Connect Your Story is to stimulate conversations about the value of traveling in the lives of travellers, hosts and communities. Connect Your Story wants to gather stories about how tourism contributes to the world in a positive
way. How travel connects people to each other, to place and to the world. Each conversation is simultaneously an opportunity to enrich worldwide stories about travel, to deepen our understanding of the essential values of tourism and to weave an alternative narrative for the sector ‘tourism’, based on the stories of ‘ordinary’ people, whose voices often remain unheard.

The more we remember and share our stories about traveling and being hospitable, the more we experience the benefits of those adventures. The more we experience those benefits, the more we can commit ourselves to giving people opportunities who would have fewer opportunities without our commitment. Through remembering and sharing our stories, we become more committed to opening our world to ourselves and to others: as a traveller, host or as a professional and volunteer in the tourism sector.

At the core of Connect Your Story is a community of “Storyweavers.” With Connect Your Story we want to build an international community of people who want to collect stories on a voluntary basis about how travel contributes to a dignified life for inhabitants of our planet. They receive training in the art of storyweaving wherein they will stimulate conversations, listen carefully, document and further tell the stories they have heard. They will weave thousands of stories into a pattern that tells about dedicated people who contribute to the possibility that tourism can turn the world into a place where the dignity of all life is central.
Connect Your Story wants to honour and encourage the hopes and initiatives of people. It wants to raise awareness about the contribution that tourism can make to the welfare of people, to prosperity, peace and cooperation. It will spread ideas and opportunities throughout the international tourism sector. It will connect people and bring citizens’ initiatives into the limelight. It also wants to become a valuable resource of meanings in action research. Everyone who is filled with enthusiasm upon hearing this idea, is welcome to join this effort!

CONCLUSION:
RESTORING THE DIGNITY OF LIFE THROUGH STORY WORK

Imagine for a moment... that you live and work in an organisation or network where the future is built on the hope and willingness of all its members. That you feel connected to the whole at all times. That strengths are seen, by everyone. That opportunities continuously pop up and people are excited to make things happen. That your organisation contributes to restoring the dignity of life in your (local) community. That you are showered in stories of how the lives of people change through your work in the organisation. This is exactly what we experience in our story
work at the Holiday Participation Centre in Flanders. So, to end this contribution, we dive into this final important question: what does this narrative work add to our specific context and the larger network of Everyone Deserves A Holiday?

An organisational view: the future lies in networks
We believe that the future of successful professional cooperation lies in a particular form of how people organise themselves. Professionals and volunteers are already attracted to dedicating their efforts in structures that act as networks. Typical in networks is the non-hierarchical way of organising and the triple-win philosophy. In a network, contributors are connected to the mission and to each other in equal relationships that honour the contribution of each participant to the whole.

Basic ‘data’ in networks are stories
The more all members are aware of purpose, possibilities and results, the more a network establishes its mission in broadening circles of influence. Maybe the most important basic building block of networks are stories, because stories carry the language and images of life. In a (organisational) world that is entrenched with an alienating vocabulary of data, industrial language and even war-language, we long for stories about people experiencing real hope and establishing prosperity in each other’s lives. Real-life-stories speak to us about moments, images, enlivened language, metaphors, feelings, gifts, and future opportunities.

Establishing dignity through lived stories
We are bombarded with stories nowadays, and to us it seems that stories have become a method for gaining influence in the lives of people. Leaders are trained to
tell their influential organisational story. Brands try selling their goods with stories. Stories are shaped to direct human behaviour that align with what influencers want: directions that create feelings of being deprived if you do not have a particular device or experience. We admit: this breaks our heart.

Because for us, stories carry and ignite our human existence and relationships with all of life. We see ourselves in the mirror of our stories. We connect with others through stories. We learn through stories. We envision the future through stories. We find meaning in our stories. We are seen and encouraged through our stories.

The pace of patience
Working with dignity is respecting the pace of life. No flower or any beautiful landscape is ever created through shortcuts. Networks are expressions of shared lives and have a life of its own. We cannot subject life to our own eagerness for quick results without offering life to death. So, patient commitment is a core attitude for leadership and story work in networks. Just like profound re-authoring work is: every story deserves our full attention and commitment.

We can make a shift, together
This is the hope we hold dear for the network in Flanders and the international Connect Your Story project: giving people the opportunities to tell their stories, so that they can connect their travel and hosting experiences with the hopes that surfaced in these moments. That they can draw meaning from these experiences for their life and for the world.

And exactly that happened to one of us after the transforming mirror-moment in France. In re-telling this experience to a friend, it became a story. The micro-moment
gained importance on a deeper level. It could be woven into the larger story of daily life and every mirror now is a reminder to the possibility of being fully alive. This is the hope we hold dear: giving people the opportunities to tell their stories, so that they can connect their experiences with the hopes that surfaced in the telling of these moments. Then chances are high that what once was a just-a-moment, suddenly becomes a deeply transformative experience. An experience where people’s conclusions about personal life, work, relationships, values and actions shift deeply. Re-authoring is on its way!

Then, after a long time of finding, documenting, sharing and connecting stories, we wake up in a new world. This is exactly what happens right now in the world of the Holiday Participation Centre.

That is why we want to broaden our work and created ‘Connect Your Story’. And that is why we invite you to become part of this adventure.
WORKS CONSULTED


**Carlson, T** (2017). Notes for The Spirit of Narrative Conference. Benoni, South Africa


**Swart, C.** (2013) Re-authoring the world: The narrative lens and practices for organisations, communities and individuals. Randburg, ZA: Knowres publishing.


WEBSITES:

Connect Your Story:
www.connectyourstory.org

Generative Journalism:
www.axiomnews.com

Holiday Participation Centre:
www.iedereenverdientvakantie.be

Story collection of ‘Everybody Deserves A Holiday’:
www.verbindjeverhaal.be
Marianne Schapmans is running the Holiday Participation Centre in Tourism Flanders, which aims to strengthen the lives of people in poverty via a holiday experience. She is currently launching the Connect Your Story project, in partnership with the World Tourism Organisation (UN) and is the ignitor of many change-processes in her organisation and network. In her work, she adapts the ideas of Appreciative inquiry and Re-authoring work.

Marianne.schapmans@iedereenverdientvakantie.be

Chené Swart is an international narrative consultant, coach and trainer. She is author of the book Re-authoring the World and contributed chapters on Coaching from a Dialogic OD paradigm and Re-authoring Leadership with and within Organizations. Chené is based in South Africa and is deeply involved in the project with tourism and travel. She offers training in Re-authoring work in Flanders, Denmark, South-Africa and other parts of the world. She is committed to ways of working and being with people that ignite the honour, dignity and beauty of their lives.

Chene Swart  chene@transformations.co.za

Griet Bouwen is author of two books around Appreciative Inquiry & Coaching and AI and change towards humanisation in organisations. Currently, she runs her small business Nieuwmakers, where she uses story work to lift up and connect people and their ideas and, in that way, she shows visions of strengths and possibilities that are/become alive in organisations and networks. She’s co-creator of the Connect Your Story platform, co-organiser of Re-authoring workshops, a Re-authoring learning journey in Flanders and currently on a learning journey into practices of story-harvesting and documentation.

Griet Bouwen| griet@nieuwmakers.be
NETWERK IEDEREEN VERDIJNT VAKANTIE

Grasmarkt 61, 1000 Brussel I T 02 504 03 91
info@iedereenverdientvakantie.be

www.iedereenverdientvakantie.be