



Article from

The Stepping Stone

November 2015
Issue 60

Re-Script Your Story

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

Did you grow up in a household that was “alive with the sound of music”? Were your parents consistently encouraging? Did you avoid disappointment and heartache?

Nah, few of us had that kind of life. Still, the human species is remarkably resilient. Most of us can bounce back from crippling crises.¹

Some researchers point out that our ability to bounce back depends on the stories we create to explain what’s happened to us.²

One of these proponents is Timothy D. Wilson, a renowned University of Virginia psychology professor and author. He maintains that our well-being is determined by how well we understand what’s happened to us, why it’s happened, and how positively we feel about it.³

HOW MIGHT THIS APPLY TO YOU?

Have you created clear, positive stories to explain how your life has turned out, or are your stories dark, murky, and based on inaccurate assumptions?

Here’s a scenario that illustrates the phenomenon I’m describing. Imagine that you get caught in an unexpected

rainstorm tomorrow morning. Which of the following explanations might you use to describe—to yourself—how you happened to get soaked?

- (1) You forgot to check *weather.com* before heading out.
- (2) You accidentally left your umbrella on the bus.
- (3) You’re a stupid idiot.

Obviously, you’ll adopt different strategies based on how you explain getting saturated.

If, for example, you selected Explanation #1, you might decide to set an alarm on your phone to remind yourself to check the weather forecast tomorrow.

If you chose Explanation #2, you might decide to tie a string around your finger to remind yourself to always check your surroundings before disembarking.

But if you chose Explanation #3, berating yourself for being an idiot, “*a habit of mind*” must be addressed. This is a much more complex challenge.⁴

WHY AM I CONCERNED ABOUT THIS ISSUE?

My *habits of mind* were influenced by a troubling incident that occurred when I was five. I didn’t understand it, and it continued to afflict me.



Soon after I started kindergarten, my father took me to the movies, just the two of us. Afterward, sitting outside the theater in his Chevy station wagon, with him gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles blanched, my dad said: “Your mother died when you were a baby.”

Then he ordered me to keep it a secret. “Never tell anyone about this!” he commanded, in a severe tone.

“Do you understand?” he demanded, staring into my deer-in-the-headlights pupils.

I nodded. Nervously.

“Hmmmph,” he sputtered, and then drove away in stony silence.

But the secret kept chasing me in the form of strangers coming to visit, bearing presents. I’d extend my hand to accept the proffered gift, ostensibly happy to be receiving it, yet all too aware that my three younger siblings—who had a different

mother, but didn’t know it—were staring at me with their mouths agape.

The question, “Why is she getting something and we aren’t?” hung in the air like a sagging sail.

I didn’t know the answer. Or why my mother’s death had to be kept secret. Or even who my mother was.

When I turned 16 an unexpected event ensued: My father told me I would be visiting two of the strangers during the next week. They turned out to be my mother’s brother and his wife, although no one ever mentioned how I was related to them.

“How’d my mother die?” I asked their smiling daughter-in-law, when I accompanied her on one of many walks around their neighborhood, while she pushed her sleeping toddler in a stroller.

The honest daughter-in-law clenched her jaw, and then spit

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26

out: “She committed suicide. It was postpartum depression. They tried everything. There was nothing they could do.”

In that instant I made up the story that I was responsible for my mother’s death. *If I hadn’t been born, she’d still be alive*, I told myself. *I must be bad, rotten to the core.*

As a result, I walled off a part of myself that I wouldn’t allow anyone to see. Then, like Humpty Dumpty, all the pieces came tumbling down when my 20-year marriage collapsed, and I was separated from my kids. It took more than a decade to put the pieces back together, in a dramatically different configuration.

Now I realize my negative thoughts were errors in thinking; just like the hapless person I described earlier, who berated himself for getting soaked in the rain. While patently wrong, this type of thinking is difficult to dislodge.

HOW DO OUR EARLY EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE THE STORIES WE CREATE?

Habits of thinking, or “core narratives” as they are often called, “have their roots in our relationships with our primary caregivers in our first years of life,” explains Wilson.⁵

When caregivers are attentive and responsive to babies’ needs, along with providing consistent, dependable and prompt care, infants usually develop secure attachment bonds. If not, a less healthy model can become established, where babies have difficulty developing close connections. They may also fear being abandoned.⁶

These attachment styles are considered blueprints with which we interpret the world around us, including our relationships and career.⁷

Blueprints are *not* life sentences, though. Remember, humans are remarkably resilient. We can re-script our stories.⁸

WHAT ARE EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES FOR RE-SCRIPTING OUR STORIES?

Writing, because it is highly structured, systematic and rule-bound, prompts us to organize, integrate and analyze our thoughts. It helps us to see the “big picture” and to experience a greater sense of control over our destiny.⁹

As a result, writing provides a stunning opportunity to re-script our stories in a more positive manner, no matter what our age.¹⁰

Here are three techniques that have been found to be effective in creating new core narratives:

1. Best Possible Selves Exercise: Decide to write for 20 minutes on four consecutive nights about your “best possible future self.”

*Imagine yourself in five years. Everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all your goals. Describe what your life is like in multiple areas (e.g., career, relationships, education, community, hobbies, recreation).*¹¹

2. The Pennebaker Writing Exercise: If there is something that has been worrying you, commit to writing about it without in-

terruption for 20 minutes on four consecutive days. *Write about something that you are thinking about too much. Write about something that you feel is affecting your life in an unhealthy way. Write about something that you have been avoiding for days, weeks or years. Let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts.*¹²

3. Step-Back-and-Ask-Why Approach: After recalling an upsetting or sad event, go back in time to re-evaluate it. *Close your eyes. Go back to the time and place of the experience so that you can see the scene in your mind’s eye. Then take a few steps back. Move away, in your mind, to a point where you can watch the event unfold from a distance. Focus on what has now become the distant you. Replay the tape again and again, trying to understand the feelings you had then, and why you had them.*¹³

It’s easy to read about these techniques and muse, “They sound interesting; maybe I’ll try them someday.”

Most people never follow through, though. Now is the time to act. Take 20 minutes and complete the first exercise. Do it four times this week. Research shows you’ll experience greater clarity about your life and career.¹⁴

* * *

IN CONCLUSION

Write to change your story.

Write to envision the life you want.

Write to become the person you want to be.

Write to heal your wounds.

Write to embrace yourself.

Write as if your life depends on it. **It does.** ■

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2015, from <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotional-life/topic/resilience/what-resilience>.
- ² Wilson, T.D. (2011). *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- ¹⁰ Wilson, T.D. (2011). *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- ¹¹ Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- ¹² Retrieved on Aug. 19, 2015, from <http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/faculty/pennebaker/home2000/writingandhealth.html>.
- ¹³ Wilson, T.D. (2011). *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.



Dr. Doreen Stern is a writer, motivational speaker and success coach in Hartford, Conn. Her dream is to become a best-selling author. She’s currently writing a book about creating the courage to tell the truth. She can be reached at Docktor@DoreenStern.com.