

Rewriting Your Script

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

W. I. Thomas

Curled up on the couch, beverage and snacks within easy reach, and armed with the remote control, life is easy. You can escape the never ending stories spinning around in your brain by focusing your attention on the characters on the screen. Your endless ToDo list, the unbalanced checkbook, conflict at work, tension between you and your partner, and your general sense of loneliness disappear as Dorothy, Sophia, Blanche and Rose deliver one punch-line after another. And when you can't take another moment of Rose's endless St. Olaf stories on the *Golden Girls*, click a button and poof, she's gone. From the couch, having a remote control means you can change the story playing on the screen.

Unfortunately, the stories spinning around in our brains are more persistent. We tend to take the "life stories" we learned in childhood and apply them to every situation we come across later on. These "life stories" consist of our basic paradigms or ways to understand and make meaning of the world. Some of them are rooted in our culture. For example, American culture gives us the Horatio Alger stories which brain washes us to believe in the myth of the self-made person. We are fed examples of individuals who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. When we succeed, we glory in our hard work and accomplishments. When we fail, we learn to blame ourselves and focus on our short comings. Rarely do we recognize how timing, location, and network connections, or lack thereof, affect us. Others are rooted in spoken and unspoken family beliefs, stories and rules. For example, I learned from my parents that in order to get rich, you have to lie, cheat and steal so that wealth was somehow an indication of corruption. Not surprisingly, I kept my fiscal moral purity in place and became a counselor. Other messages are rooted in our personal experiences. For example, my grandfather molested me when I was young. Among other things, I learned that people hurt you if you let them get close.

Whatever their source, we take these "life stories" and apply them to all of our experiences. For example, I graduated with my counseling degree into a saturated market. Using the Horatio Alger "life story," when I couldn't find a job, I blamed myself. Because of my family's "life story" about money, I lost money for the first year of my private practice because it somehow seemed corrupt to profit from someone's pain so I charged far less than the going rate. Similarly, my first serious relationship slid into the murky field of, if not exactly rape, then at least extreme boundary violating sexual encounters because I equated love with abuse. It never occurred to me to declare my "no" with substance or to leave when my partner crossed one boundary after another.

Our "life stories" provide the filter through which we process our experiences. They shape the priority, weight, tone, and meaning we give to our experience. They also influence what we expect to find in the future and filter out or distort those experiences that don't fit the general plotline. They can become self-fulfilling prophecies because they affect how we respond to situation, and how we remember it. In the example I gave above, I believed that if I let someone get close, they would hurt me. It never occurred to me that I had the right to set firm boundaries or leave. And I got hurt. In contrast, loving behavior is hard to take in. I panicked when, after dating for a month, my current partner offered to give me her recently deceased grandmother's cell phone. I thought she was trying to

control me. It took a lot of reassurance on her part and both of us getting huge cell phone bills that I got that her offer was about saving money (she was paying for that phone anyway) rather than control.

The good news is that we can rewrite our life stories and in doing so, rewrite our lives. One way to do this is to play with the stories you tell yourself about your life. Start out by creating a time line of significant events in your life, beginning with your birth and ending with your current age. It may be helpful to break the line into the following segments: 0-3, 3-5, 5-7, 7-12, 12-15, 15-18, 18-22, 22-26, 26-30, 30-35, and so on.

For each time segment, write out the significant events without explaining them, judging them, or giving them meaning. It's a good idea to leave some space in every segment in case you remember something you'd like to add later. Once you have the basic events laid out, use the timeline to write the story of your life from various perspectives. When you're writing the stories, it's OK to add in true events, highlight some and ignore others but it's important in this exercise to stay honest. This might take awhile, so it's OK to do this in chunks, perhaps over the course of a week (or a month) giving yourself 15 minutes to an hour to do each part.

The first time around, write the story of you, the protagonist, as a total victim. Maximize this, making the horrible things that befall the protagonist more dramatic, more awful, more unfair, and more unjust than real life could have ever possibly been. Make the reader feel really sorry for you. The second time around, write your story as a comedy. Make the reader laugh at the life circumstances and your responses to them. The third time around, write the story of your life as a drama painting yourself as the resilient hero, intrepidly overcoming the obstacles that life has put in your way, noting the silver linings of the obstacles that you faced and the strengths you have displayed.

When you're done with all three versions, read over them and see how each reflects or challenges your "life stories." Also notice how each version affects how you feel about yourself and about your future. And when life happens, see if you can pick out the "life stories" that are shaping the way you interpret the experience and stop telling the stories that are no longer serving you.

*Regina Sewell is a mental health counselor. To ask a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com. Her most recent publication, "Sliding Away" can be found in **Knowing Pains: Women on Love, Sex and Work in Our 40s**, edited by Molly Rosen.*

This article originally appeared in Outlook Columbus in 2010.