

What Story Do You Carry?

I felt moved as I read the transcript from a Ted Talk given by the Nigerian author, [Chimamanda Adichie](#), titled “The Danger of a Single Story”. She spoke of her early love of reading, initially always Western children’s books. When she wrote stories in school they mirrored what she had read, not her experience. Later she went to university in the USA. Her roommate met her and voiced stereotyped expectations of her, a view developed from the stilted view portrayed in Western media of the African “country”. A professor even rejected her writing, now of her experiences in growing up, as not being authentically African, because she wrote of reading and speaking English, having a happy childhood, and not to his flawed idea that all of Africa was war torn, starving and destitute. She shared other stories of a similar ilk.

We all carry stories. A few may be inspiring, liberating and expansive. These rare gems will act to open the mind to possibilities and lift judgements placed by others to uncover potential. I am all for this type of story.

Generally, the stories we naturally carry are restrictive, declaring the nature of groups and individuals based on their fit to some specific characteristic. As such they cloud our ability to see others as they are when the stories we apply (without even realising it!) rule out any other possibilities as being reasonable. They get in the way of us appreciating the diversity of others. They are essential for bigotry to occur. The stories separate people, cultures, groups, nations, political parties, gangs



You get to choose which stories you use!

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Abstract

The stories we create and carry from our past problematically distort our current experience by imposing unconscious judgements on the people and situations we are experiencing. There are ways to recognise and move past those limiting judgements, which this article explores.

Keywords

Beliefs, coaching, conscious living, conscious self, diversity, inclusion, negative messages, relationship with others, relationship with self, unconscious bias, values

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and peer groups. Their liberal use stops us seeing others for who they really are, and connecting in a meaningful manner. With a story clouding our perception we tend to mentally validate our story by finding any matching attributes, and filtering any mismatch. It is a mechanism the brain uses to simplify processing the complex data. It leads to erroneous and limiting judgements: “This person is a ... therefore”:

- they are ...
- their experience and background is ...
- they judge me as ...
- they expect ...
- they cannot ...
- they don’t know ...
- they value ...
- They are different from me because ...
- they should be [pitied / hated / loved / shunned / included / excluded / listened to / ...] because ...

And so the list goes on.

The really interesting thing is we also can and do carry stories about ourselves. All the above may be rephrased with “I” instead of “they”. We then have a belief about ourselves that indicates the story we hold about who we are, what we can achieve, our strengths and weaknesses. This story is often inherited from our childhood, and we then fail to update the story as we grow and develop. We can hear old stories of ourselves from inside that are long out of date. Unchallenged, they persist. Even when they are challenged, these old familiar stories return on the slightest indication that they will be tolerated.

A great thing about coaching is the powerful assistance it can provide in recognising and adjusting the stories you work with.

How Can I Respond Usefully to a Story I Carry?

First, recognise that any of the above sample scripts, or others similar in intent, are running. Whether about you or someone you are meeting, these statements of judgement are a clear indication a story is running, that you are generalising about this person based on some arbitrary criteria.

Second, acknowledge to yourself that this process is limiting your perception and there may be a different or broader perception to be had of this person. Again, this applies as much to stories about ourselves as it does of those about others.

Third, ask questions of yourself that open your mind to alternatives. Examples include:

- What [does this person / do I] bring to this situation that is of value and different from what I know (I.e. my current story)?
- What do I notice about [this person / me] in this situation that is outside my previous experience (I.e. Different from my story of them)?

- What is one thing of value [this person bring / I bring] that I hadn't recognised and acknowledged? What's another one?

Each of these questions serves to challenge the mind in a way the mind likes to be challenged. They are open questions asking for investigation and inquiry. The mind will respond with answers, and in so doing will have to adjust the story it was carrying. That said, some stories are so deeply burned into our psyche that it will take many such intentional challenges to create a shift to a new one.

Forth, actually engage with the person in an open dialogue, mentally holding the possibility that your story is incomplete or incorrect. Become a 'naïve inquirer' and ask questions of them to understand who they really are and what matters to them.

One of the stories I carry about myself is “I am inadequate.” That shows up in almost every context, is generally thoroughly unfounded, and the monotony of repeatedly retraining my brain can be frustrating. However, the breakthrough of doing so is worthwhile because then I shift mentally and emotionally into a free space where productive action becomes possible. In fact, when I step out of my story of inadequacy the question about success does not show up. I am in the “zone” and make things happen as a matter of course, the mind not interfering.

What is getting in your way with yourself or others? What groups or individuals do you exclude because ...? Are you prepared to entertain the possibility that the stories you hold may be invalid, even if only for the person in front of you?

Freeing yourself of the limiting effect of stories opens the possibility of new and exciting opportunities, relationships and outcomes. Which of your stories needs to be dropped? All the best with the adventure of redrafting your world through changing your stories.

For more information related to themes in this article, refer to chapter 6 (Deciphering Your Internal State) of: Harrison, S. G. (2012). *Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose*. Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

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