

The Healing Journey – Creating a new narrative

by Thomas Wood MSW, LCSW

“What we do see depends mainly on what we look for.... In the same field the farmer will notice the crop, the geologist the fossils, botanists the flowers, artists the coloring, sportsmen the cover for the game. Though we may all look at the same things, it does not all follow that we should see them.”

—*“The Beauties of Nature,”* by John Lubbock

As you continue your healing journey, you likely will stumble across some narratives — stories you tell about yourself — that hold you back. You are much greater than you realize, but to see and live your greatness, you will need to look past the old limiting narratives that are weighing you down.

I once met a man who told me he was “just plain stubborn.” This got him into all kinds of trouble: When he was “just plain stubborn” at work, his supervisor thought he was insubordinate, and when he was “just plain stubborn” at home, his spouse thought he was rigid and unyielding.

When I got to know him, I discovered that he wasn’t stubborn; he was principled. He was determined. No one realized this about him because he had told them he was “just plain stubborn,” so anytime he stood up for what he felt was right, everyone thought, “Uh-oh, here he goes again” and tuned him out.

His process of healing meant learning and living a new story for his life, in which he stands up for important principles, but

with a twist — he now also focuses on respecting how other people feel. Living this new narrative put an end to his boss’s talk of insubordination and his spouse’s concern about rigidity.

Identifying a problematic or toxic narrative is hard to do on your own, because it just isn’t possible for you to see yourself with “fresh eyes.” When you are trapped in a toxic narrative, you are flooded with feelings of guilt and inadequacy as you rehash the same old negative thoughts about yourself over and over. It is hard to get traction when you are weighed down by these terrible feelings.

Rewriting your narrative is empowering and liberating. Finding new words that describe who you are and that honor the good you are doing, have done, or hope to do leads to a life full of happy energy and positive self-esteem. As you progress, you will find yourself experiencing gratitude, forgiveness, trust, self-acceptance, and self-love.

The starting point in narrative therapy is what you believe about yourself right now. That means telling your story to the therapist, but with a difference. This time, you are talking to someone who intentionally chooses not to believe you.

- “I’m a failure at my job.” *Oh really?*
- “My marriage is awful and it’s all my fault.” *Hmm.*
- “My kids are all messed up. I’m a terrible parent.” *<quizzical look>*

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To use John Lubbock’s images, when you describe your life, it might sound like a field full of untamed weeds growing every which way. The narrative therapist will hear and see something different — a lovely prairie, wild and free, or a beautiful meadow, lush with growth.

“But that’s not true,” you might be tempted to say, “I really am a mess/failure/loser/[insert judgmental word here].” To which the therapist responds, “Oh really? And this is the only possible way to look at you and your situation?”

Toxic narratives start when a voice in your head points to a few problematic details and shouts, “Guilty, guilty, GUILTY!” The narrative therapist responds, “Not so fast. There is other evidence to consider.” The therapist’s skepticism is based on the undeniable reality that there is no one single way to view a situation. When we go through your story we very likely will find that there are other ways to see it.

This gets at the heart of the matter: There are many ways to see yourself and tell your story. If you’ve fallen into a toxic narrative, you can re-write it.

Developing a new narrative can open up vistas you’ve not seen before. But it takes strength and determination to anchor the new story, because toxic narratives can be persistent. As the saying goes, if it was a long walk into the woods, then it might take a bit to find your way out.

Just know this: Whatever situation you are dealing with, the way you see it is not the only possible view. There are other ways to see it. Healing is possible in any situation. It, and you, can get better. ■

Next time on The Healing Journey we will talk about the five attitudes and four actions that lead to healing.

This article provides a general overview of certain mental health issues. It is not advice to take any specific approach to diagnosis or treatment of a mental health issue. You should consult your mental health provider for a detailed assessment of your own symptoms and circumstances before embarking on any treatment for a mental health issue.



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DID YOU KNOW?

Many people may get their fill of boxes on Christmas Day. However, people living in certain countries, including Canada, know that there may be some more boxes in store on the day after Christmas as well.

Boxing Day is an annual holiday celebrated in Canada on December 26. Canadians are not alone in celebrating Boxing Day, which is observed in Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, among other countries.

The origin story behind Boxing Day is not entirely known. One theory regarding those origins connect the holiday to 19th century England and the giving of boxes that included money, presents and/or food to British servants on the day after Christmas. The servants had to work on Christmas while their employers celebrated, so they waited until the following day to celebrate with their families. The boxes were a token of appreciation and a way to make servants’ celebrations more bountiful and enjoyable.

Another theory links Boxing Day to collection boxes for the poor. Long known as a time of giving, the holiday season was a time to give to the poor. So when the boxes were opened on the day after Christmas, they were full and the money within them was then distributed to the less fortunate.

Modern Boxing Day celebrations don’t resemble either theory of the day’s origins. In fact, modern Boxing Day more closely resembles Black Friday, a retail holiday in the United States that marks the unofficial beginning of the holiday shopping season. Retailers discount items on Boxing Day, and the deals compel people across Canada to spend the day after Christmas shopping.

Canadian soccer fans who are not excited by the idea of shopping on Boxing Day can celebrate like many of their British counterparts. In England, Boxing Day has become synonymous with European football, and the Premier League has ensured its fans can spend a good portion of Boxing Day watching the action on the pitch. This year’s Boxing Day slate includes 10 matches.

Boxing Day may not have maintained too significant a connection to its past. But the day remains one to look forward to in 2021.

