

DEREK SIVERS

FROM THE BOOK “**USEFUL NOT TRUE**”:

# THE PAST IS NOT TRUE

2023-07-20

When I was 17, I was driving recklessly and crashed into an oncoming car. I found out that I broke the other driver's spine, and she'll never walk again.

I carried that burden with me everywhere, and felt so horrible about it for so many years that at age 35 I decided to find this woman to apologize. I found her name and address, went to her house, knocked on the door, and a middle-aged woman answered. As soon as I said, “I'm the teenager that hit your car eighteen years ago and broke your spine”, I started sobbing - a big ugly cry, surfacing years of regret. She was so sweet, and hugged me saying, “Oh sweetie, sweetie! Don't worry. I'm fine!” Then she walked me into her living room. Walked.

Turns out I had misunderstood. Yes she fractured a couple vertebrae but it never stopped her from walking. She said “that little accident” helped her pay more attention to her fitness, and since then has been in better health than ever. Then she apologized for causing the accident in the first place. Apologized.

I said, “Well, no, it was my fault for ignoring the yield sign.”

She said, “No, it was my fault because I was eating while driving and not watching the road. You didn't hit me. I hit you.”

Seems we had both thought the accident was our fault, and had spent

eighteen years feeling bad about it. This time she started crying, sniffled, grabbed a tissue to wipe her eyes and said, “It’s so *stupid* - these stories.”

---

Aim a laser pointer at the moon, then move your hand the tiniest bit, and it’ll move a thousand miles at the other end. The tiniest misunderstanding long ago, amplified through time, leads to piles of misunderstandings in the present.

We think of the past like it’s a physical fact - like it’s real. But the past is what we call our memory and stories about it. Imperfect memories, and stories built on one interpretation of incomplete information. That’s “*the* past”.

**You can change your history.** The actual factual events are such a small part of it. Everything else is perspective, open for re-interpretation. The past is never done.