

Thoughts and Emotions (2 of 5) The Influence of Stories

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We are continuing this week's topic of the relationship between emotions and thinking, thinking and emotions.

We sometimes tell a friend the story of our day. Your friend asks: "How was it at work today? Tell me about the challenges you had with your boss." And you reply: "Oh, that boss of mine is always demanding and angry. I can never do enough. I can never do it right. There's disrespect. I have some ideas, and the boss takes those ideas and makes them their own. I don't get any credit, and I'm relegated to the back room." As you tell that story, there can be anger and despair, "Oh, this is terrible."

But, imagine if your friend said: "Tell me about your day at work. What did you learn about patience today? How did your ability to be patient improve today?" And you reply: "Oh, I have a difficult boss. But many times during the day when the boss was demanding, I was able to breathe deeply and relax. I didn't buy into my tension

and anger. I was able to stay calm through it all. I was able to manage the situation so much wiser by staying calm. When I was working with a colleague who was slow in doing the tasks I needed, I found that I had more patience. That was good because I found out later that my colleague was dealing with a big personal issue. Someone in their family had died recently. I was so glad I was able to be patient.”

So that is a different story. The emotions of telling that story are very different from the first story.

Imagine again if a person said to you: “How was your day? I’d love to hear a little about what brought you joy and delight today.” You answer: “Oh yes, it was so nice to watch some of my colleagues work together and collaborate. They were creative, kind, and supportive of each other. Seeing how respectful they were of each other was the highlight of my day. I was reminded that it’s possible to be that way with each other.”

What I’m trying to convey here is that we can tell the same story, more or less, with different themes, purposes, and things that we emphasize. Depending on what we emphasize, we’ll have a different emotional response to it. Our tone of voice, our body language, and the feelings and emotions that come are influenced by what we emphasize.

Human beings tell many stories. But, in our stories, we are not so conscious of the choices we make – what we choose to emphasize. Some people emphasize how everything is wrong. Many of their stories have to do with complaining. Some people emphasize how everything impacts them: “I’m the victim of everything. It’s so hard.” Some people tell stories from the point of view of a lack of something. There’s not enough of something.

There are an infinite number of ways that stories can be told. But if we tell the same story over and over again, or there is a focal point that we’re often emphasizing, then we’re going to reinforce the inner disposition that we have. We might not be aware of how much conditioning and influence our stories have on who and how we are.

These are stories we say out loud to people and stories we tell ourselves. Often, with the stories we tell ourselves, we’re kind of living the stories. The stories are an expression of our emotional life, what we think is important, or how we’re feeling at any time.

So if we’re angry or if there’s aversion, then a lot of the stories can be aversive stories or stories of what’s wrong. If we have deep sadness or hurt, the story might still be about anger because we’re kind of recoiling from the hurt, and we want someone to blame. The story has

a lot of blame: “I’m a victim. Someone has treated me badly.”

Some stories may have aspects of truth to them that make them complicated. We think that the story is true, and so we feel justified in telling the story that way. But truth is varied. Truth is thematic. How you tell a story depends on the angle you take on it. If you tell the story from the point of view of what did you learn today versus how you were hurt, you’ll tell the story differently. They’re both kind of true, but which story is better for you? Which story has a better influence on you?

Telling the story of how you were kind today is very different than saying: “Oh, I was mean today. I’m always mean. This is hopeless for me.” If you tell the story of how you were kind, then you might notice that there was a time when you opened the door for someone: “I guess I’m not always mean.”

So we can be sensitive that we tell our stories in biased ways. We select how to tell our stories. When we tell the same story over and over again or use the same bias to tell the story, it can reinforce our inner life. That storytelling can reinforce our dispositions, our emotional life, how we feel, and what we do.

It’s hard to change the direction of an ocean liner, to make it go a different way. But it is possible to start

recognizing what is actually happening. One way to begin is to become skilled at recognizing: “Oh, that’s telling a story. There’s a story.”

You can do that in meditation and daily life. You can notice your thinking, your story-making. Notice how much it is happening. Once you notice how much it’s happening, then spend some time investigating your stories. Some of you might write them down in a journal. Read it and look at the angle that you’re using to tell the story. What kind of self are you in the story? Are you a self that has agency? Or are you a self who is a victim? Are you a self who needs to demand their rights? Are you a self who has a sense of confidence? I’m making things up here. I don’t mean to imply anything here.

Look at the themes of how your stories tend to go and consider whether there are other realistic ways of looking at them. This is not to make a Pollyanna story or to deny the difficulties. But there may be alternative perspectives that support you and help you become freer, kinder, and wiser – that help you engage in the situation in a way that’s better for everyone.

One perspective that I like for stories, if you’re trying to figure out what’s happening, is to ask: “What is best for everyone involved (as opposed to what’s best for me)?” That story might help you to live a life that supports everyone, including yourself.

So, stories are a very important part of human life. Sometimes I think that we shouldn't be called Homo sapiens. We should be called Homo historians because stories are such a powerful characteristic of human life. Perhaps, animals tell stories. But the creativity and the ways we tell stories disassociated from reality, and the impact that our stories have on our inspiration, our faith, our confidence, our lack of those things, and our sense of purpose and meaning is huge. So become wise about stories.

Meditation, where thinking becomes really quiet and still, is valuable in that it can help us see with greater clarity the stories we live by. Let us become wise about that part of our life so that our emotional and inner life is not unduly and unhelpfully influenced by the stories we tell.

I hope that today is an interesting day for looking at your stories. If you have someone to talk with, a stranger or a friend, you might talk about what the role stories have for you in your life. You can become wiser about this topic of the storytelling mind. Thank you.