

# The Facts and the Stories We Tell

Jake worked for a large technology company in Silicon Valley but hungered to launch his own business. He'd spent the past year trying to raise money for a Web-based approach to evaluating financial risk. Alan was a wealthy investor, based in Boston, whom Jake met through Susan, a mutual acquaintance. A month later, when Alan was visiting San Francisco, he invited Jake to meet him for breakfast. The scheduled hour stretched into three. By the time they parted, Jake was convinced he'd found his financing. Alan promised to be in touch within a few days. In the interim, he encouraged Jake to call or e-mail him about any further thoughts he had. "You can reach me anytime," Alan told him. "I'm always on my BlackBerry."

Over the weekend, Jake had a flood of new insights about the venture and on Monday morning he sent Alan an e-mail. When he hadn't heard back by the following morning, he called Alan but got his voice mail. Disappointed not to get a response, Jake didn't make too much of it. "Something must have come up," he told himself. "This is a busy guy."

Late in the day Wednesday, Jake tried again, phone and e-mail, but still got no response. He considered calling Susan but remembered she was out of the country on a mountain-climbing vacation. Wary of pushing Alan too hard, Jake let two more days go by before e-mailing him again on Friday. Again no response. At midafternoon, Jake happened to flip on CNBC in his office. There was Alan, talking on *Squawk Box* about some of his recent investments. So much for his being preoccupied by an emergency, Jake thought.

Feeling disses and devalued, Jake angrily concluded that there was no point in continuing to pursue Alan. "Who wants to be involved

with a guy like that anyway?" he said to himself. A week later, still simmering, he called Susan, who had just arrived home from vacation.

"What a phony jerk your friend is," he told her. "He tells me how great my idea is, encourages me to call him anytime, and then he doesn't even have the decency to respond to any of my messages."

"That's funny," Susan replied, "because I just got an e-mail from Alan telling me he sent you detailed comments on your business plan and never heard back from *you*." Jake felt his stomach lurch. Could he inadvertently have given Alan his *work* e-mail? He opened his computer and went straight to the spam file. Sure enough, there was the e-mail from Alan, dated the Monday after they met, with a long attachment that had never gotten through Jake's company firewall.

"Quite an adventure since our great meeting," the note began. "As I was about to board my flight, I reached into my jacket pocket and realized my BlackBerry was missing. By the time I landed in Boston, someone had opened an online bank account in my name. I had to close down every account I have. My new cell phone number is at the bottom of this page and I'm writing you from my new e-mail. The good news is I got time to do a revised business plan, which I've attached. Let's talk tomorrow. Alan."

So how exactly did Jake get it so wrong? In his mind, he made his judgment about Alan based on the facts. What he didn't recognize is that he chose to put the facts together to create a specific story.

A *fact* is something that can be objectively verified by any person. It is irrefutable. It was a fact that Jake made several calls and sent several e-mails to Alan. It was a fact that he received no phone messages back from Alan, nor any e-mails, at least not ones that landed in his inbox. It was also a fact that Alan appeared on CNBC.

A *story*, by contrast, is something we create to make sense of the facts. We do so because human beings are meaning-making animals. We seek to understand. The problem is that we often tell our stories so fast that we mistake them for the facts and then treat our stories as if they're irrefutably true. Also, because bad is stronger than good, we often instinctively tell negative stories.

Jake's story was that Alan's failure to return several phone calls and e-mails meant Alan was rude and disingenuous. Moreover, if

Alan had time to shoot the breeze on CNBC, that proved he obviously hadn't been deterred from responding to Jake by any emergency. Plausible as Jake's story seemed to him at the time—"I'm just telling you what happened," he said to Susan—it didn't reflect what had *really* happened. Not surprisingly, the fact that Alan received no reply to his e-mail prompted him to tell a similarly negative story about Jake. It didn't occur to either one of them that there might be a perfectly plausible explanation for the behavior of the other. Instead, each of them felt devalued, triggered, and angry. Each believed his feelings were justified by the facts, and neither got what he really wanted.

Awareness by itself can powerfully diminish our reactivity. By simply being curious about how we're responding, we move from the role of the person experiencing the feelings to that of self-observer. Rather than feeling rocked by the emotions our stories create—"I'm angry," "The guy is a jerk," "I wasn't treated fairly"—we stand apart, more dispassionately. Instead of acting on our feelings, we're free to coolly evaluate them. By shifting perspectives, we reintroduce the power of choice.

Plainly, we can't change the facts, but we do have a choice about what to make of them. We *can* take more control of the stories we choose to tell ourselves. We can also use our reflective capacity to see the world in subtler, more empowering ways, without rationalizing, minimizing, or denying the facts. To the degree that it serves us well, we can intentionally cultivate a positive bias to offset our evolutionary bias for the negative.

## REALISTIC OPTIMISM

Positive thinking has long had a bad name in sophisticated circles. In *Candide*, written in the midst of the Enlightenment in 1759, Voltaire mocks the optimism of Candide's tutor, Dr. Pangloss, and his relentless belief that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." Pollyanna, the title character in Eleanor Porter's early-twentieth-century children's books, was able to resourcefully find the good in any situation. Over time, a Pollyanna came to symbolize a fatuous person who is unreasonably or illogically optimistic. Books such as

Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* have sold millions of copies, but they're often disparaged as simpleminded hype.

Optimism can indeed be a form of self-deception and denial—something Roy Baumeister calls “an exclusively confirmatory approach to information processing.” Or, as the psychologist Christopher Peterson puts it, “Unrelenting optimism precludes the caution, sobriety, and conservation of resources that accompany sadness in a normal and presumably adaptive response to setback.” In its extreme form, optimism is a reductionistic choosing up of sides. It may make us feel better in the short term, but it doesn’t equip us to operate effectively in a complex world or to learn from our mistakes.

Relentless pessimism, on the other hand, is just as narrow and extreme and may be even more dysfunctional. The evidence is clear that persistent negative emotions take a toll on our health, our capacity to think clearly, and ultimately our effectiveness. “A healthy psychological immune system strikes a balance that allows us to feel good enough to cope with our situation but bad enough to do something about it,” Daniel Gilbert writes in his wonderful book *Stumbling on Happiness*. What, then, might be a more nuanced perspective that includes both optimism and pessimism, positivity and negativity, without choosing up sides between them?

The psychologist Sandra Schneider has coined the term “realistic optimism,” which she defines as “accepting the reality of the current situation and finding a satisfying meaning therein.” In contrast to blind faith, false hope, and magical thinking, realistic optimism balances a hopeful and positive perspective with a recognition that the desired outcome may or may not occur. “Realistic optimism,” Schneider explains, “involves being lenient in our evaluation of past events, actively appreciating the positive aspects of our current situation and routinely emphasizing possible opportunities for the future.” If realism refers to the facts, optimism is the outgrowth of the story we choose to tell about those facts. Realistic optimism serves as a fuel for exerting the maximum effort on the right priorities in order to influence the best possible outcome.

Imagine that you’re five feet, four inches tall and your single-minded goal is a career in the NBA. Optimism is likely to lead only to disappointment. If your more realistic goal is to be the best basketball

player you're capable of being despite your height disadvantage, optimism may make you more resilient and willing to work harder to improve. Numerous studies have demonstrated that focusing on a positive outcome rather than avoiding a negative one typically leads to greater persistence, more flexibility in finding ways to reach a goal, increased creativity in solving problems, greater internal motivation, more satisfaction, and better results. Expecting to succeed, in short, makes us more likely to succeed. "Each of us can be considered an active player in the quality of our experiences," writes Schneider, "with at least partial control of whether good things happen. Realistically, having a good attitude is likely to pay off."

By contrast, denying reality—either by actively avoiding information you prefer not to know or by looking selectively for evidence that confirms what you already believe—doesn't make it go away. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins finds the pitch-perfect example of realistic optimism in the story of James Stockdale, the highest-ranking naval officer held as a prisoner of war during Vietnam. Over the seven years he was held prisoner, Stockdale was tortured repeatedly, held in solitary confinement, and given no reason to believe he would ever make it out alive.

"I never lost faith in the end of the story," Stockdale told Collins. "I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the event into the defining event of my life." The key was an ability to embrace both optimism and realism concurrently—something Collins named "the Stockdale Paradox." As Stockdale explained it, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

More commonly, and often unconsciously, we look to confirm what we already believe—by telling ourselves stories that match our preconceptions. "Over and over again," explains Jonathan Haidt, "studies show that people set out on a cognitive mission to bring back reasons to support their preferred belief or action. And because we are usually successful in this mission, we end up with the illusion of objectivity. We really believe that our position is rationally and objectively justified."

Think of the story Jake told himself when he believed that Alan

wasn't responding to his e-mails and phone calls. Taking a stance of realistic optimism, rather than instantly assuming the worst, might well have prompted Jake to tell a different story than he did about Alan's seeming failure to respond. "He was genuinely enthusiastic," Jake might have said to himself. "I'm going to assume there's a good explanation for his not calling." Telling *that* story would have left Jake feeling better, rather than squandering his energy in anger and frustration. It also might have prompted him to pursue Alan more avidly, rather than writing him off.

## BEYOND BLAME

When we default reactively to telling negative stories, we almost invariably assign ourselves the role of victim. That's what Jake did with Alan (and Alan likely did with Jake). Blaming others for what goes wrong in our lives is a form of self-protection. By off-loading responsibility, we feel better in the short term. It's a form of protection we learn very early in our lives. "It's not *my* fault," we protest defensively. The limitation of the victim role is that it undermines our power to influence our circumstances.

The alternative is taking responsibility. That doesn't mean blaming ourselves for everything bad that happens to us, because that's just substituting one extreme for another. Rather, it means intentionally looking for where our responsibility lies in any given situation—and how the story we choose to tell might influence the outcome. When we met Linda, a VP at a global advertising agency, she told us that her biggest trigger at work was that her boss often failed to respond to her requests for feedback on projects she was about to undertake. Linda concluded that he didn't consider her ideas worth his time and often worried that her days at the agency were numbered. She felt devalued by her boss, and it dawned on her that she often took out her frustration on the members of her own team.

As soon as we introduced Linda to the difference between facts and stories, she realized that she really had no idea if her story about her boss was accurate. The next time she met with him, she felt emboldened to pose the question directly. "I'm just wondering," she said, "why you don't ever seem to respond to my requests for feedback." He

looked surprised. "You've always covered every angle, and there's no need," he said. "I only respond to those kinds of e-mails when I see a problem. I'm really sorry. I thought you knew."

The experience prompted Linda to build a ritual around a new way of responding when she found herself assuming the worst. "The story I'm telling myself," she would say to the person who had triggered her, and then she'd share what she was assuming. "Have I got it right," she'd conclude, "or is it just my story?" In most cases, she found that her worst fears weren't confirmed. In the rare instances when they were, the way she asked the question—taking responsibility for her assumption—allowed her to have a conversation about the situation rather than putting the other person on the defensive.

Paul, a team leader at a large oil company, often found himself triggered by the fact that Andrew, a member of his team in charge of strategic planning, didn't seem to spend much time at his desk. Paul became convinced that Andrew was slacking, even though Andrew remained one of the most creative and productive members of his team. We asked Paul to consider a simple question: "Might there be a more positive explanation for why Andrew isn't always at his desk?" On reflection, Paul concluded that perhaps Andrew was doing his work somewhere else at times. More important, he realized that, given Andrew's high productivity, it really didn't matter where he did his work.

When we're triggered—and the underlying explanation is that we feel devalued—we typically revert to telling our stories in black and white. It's right or wrong, good or bad, hero or villain. Neither of these extremes captures the richer, more complex reality of what goes on in most interactions. Instead, we set up a contest in which someone has to lose. If I'm right, you're wrong. If I'm the hero, you're the villain.

But what if each of these opposites were true about you? Right *and* wrong. Good *and* bad. Villain *and* hero. Take a moment to get a pen and a sheet of paper. Draw a line down the middle of the page. Now consider this question: What do you like best about yourself, and what is it that people most appreciate about you? On the left-hand side, write a list of your best qualities. Make it as complete as possible before you read any further. Don't stop until you've come up with at least a half-dozen qualities.

Okay, now think for a moment about what qualities you like

least in yourself and that you imagine others would most like to see change. On the right-hand side of the page, write down as comprehensive a list as you can. Don't read any further until you've completed both lists.

Now take a look at both columns. The person with the qualities on the left probably sounds attractive—someone you'd like and admire. The person on the right most likely seems unappealing—someone you'd be inclined to avoid, perhaps even at all costs.

So which one is *really* you?

The answer, of course, is both, but that's difficult for any of us to acknowledge. The negative qualities feel threatening—evidence of inadequacies and unworthiness that tend to offset the positive list. As usual, it's the negative that catches our attention. Carl Jung referred to these qualities as our *shadow*—the weaknesses, shortcomings, and unacceptable aspects of ourselves that we typically seek to disown.

"Everyone carries a shadow," Jung wrote, "and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is." Indeed, the more oblivious we are to our limitations, the more likely we are to unwittingly act them out or project them onto others. Here's how we described it in *The Power of Full Engagement*, "Frightened by an underlying feeling of powerlessness, the bully compensates by treating people harshly. Haunted by unacknowledged feelings of inadequacy, the successful executive forever parades his achievements and talks endlessly about the famous and important people he knows. Unable to face her own underlying envy, the polite and proper hostess finds subtle ways to disparage and dismiss everyone around her."

Parading our strengths and denying our shadow doesn't win friends or influence people, and it's an energy drain. "Healthy self-esteem," writes Terrence Real, "is the capacity to cherish oneself in the face of one's own imperfections." Frightening as it may be to acknowledge our shortcomings and admit our mistakes, the irony is that doing so tends to inspire greater respect from others, not less.

By accepting the whole of who we are, we no longer have to defend our value so vigilantly. What previously triggered us can instead become a source of learning and information. If we're honest self-observers, we acknowledge what is true, without losing value in the

process, and we discard what is not true. Rather than defending ourselves against perceived threats and attacks, we use the best of the feedback we receive to become more of who we're capable of being.

## THE LENSES

Our identity is the sum of the stories we tell about ourselves. Our worldview is the sum of the stories we tell about others. We have an extraordinary capacity to shape our reality, for better or for worse. Each of us, however, has a default lens. We call this lens reality, because most of us believe we see things the way they are. In truth, each of us sees reality through a fixed lens that selectively filters our view of the world. To paraphrase Paul Simon in "The Boxer": "A man sees what he wants to see and disregards the rest." We must learn to look through a broader range of lenses.

The first new way of seeing is through the Reflective Lens. That requires asking two very simple questions when you feel yourself being triggered. The first is "What are the facts here?" The second is "What is the story I'm telling myself about those facts?" Making this distinction allows us to stand outside ourselves and observe our experience rather than simply reacting to it. It also opens us to the possibility that whatever story we're telling ourselves isn't necessarily true—or might not be the only one we could tell.

Triggers almost invariably prompt us to tell stories that leave us feeling devalued. The reflective lens gives us the chance to consider an alternative story. For Jake, with whom we began this chapter, the story could have been that other priorities had commanded Alan's attention but there was still every reason to believe Alan's initial enthusiasm was real. For Paul, who initially told himself that Andrew was a slacker because he wasn't reliably at his desk, a more realistically optimistic story was that Andrew was working elsewhere and, in any case, was getting his job done.

When we feel bruised by someone else's words, we typically assume the person intended to hurt us. If a boss or a colleague walks by without acknowledging us, we feel snubbed. But just as likely, she was preoccupied with an issue of her own—perhaps even something that triggered *her*—in which case what we experienced wasn't aimed at us

at all. The reflective lens helps us not to settle on our stories so quickly and instead to remain curious, even to give the benefit of the doubt so long as there is any doubt. We derive benefit from that perspective. By remaining curious and even realistically optimistic, rather than reactive, we think better, perform better, and get along with others more easily.

A second more spacious way of viewing the world is through the Reverse Lens. That simply means looking at a given situation through the eyes of your perceived antagonist. It doesn't mean sacrificing your own point of view but rather widening your lens. Almost certainly, the person you feel triggered by sees the situation very differently than you do. The first question to ask yourself might be "What is he feeling, and how does that make sense?"

Fred, a banking executive with whom we worked, told us a story about asking Bianca, a Spanish-speaking member of his team, to handle a small transaction with a key Mexican client who was more comfortable negotiating in her native language. Bianca agreed, but several weeks later, Fred discovered that the transaction had never gotten done. Seething at Bianca but uneasy about confronting her, he simply avoided her instead.

When we asked Fred to try on the Reverse Lens, he found it difficult at first, as many of our clients do. "It just wasn't important to her," he said. We asked if there might be any other plausible explanation, from her perspective. "Well, yes," he acknowledged. Bianca had been working on a major deal of her own. Fred wasn't the only one who requested her help with Spanish-speaking clients. Perhaps, he speculated, Bianca felt resentful at being expected to serve as a translator every time someone on the team needed help. In a matter of minutes, Fred moved from feeling angry to feeling abashed.

The next day, Fred approached Bianca about the favor he'd asked. "It occurred to me," he told her, "that you're really busy and you've got a million requests like mine. Why don't I just deal with this myself?" Bianca was plainly relieved. "Wow, I really appreciate your saying that. No one else here seems to notice. The truth is, it just totally slipped my mind. I'm really sorry. Let me handle it right now."

Counterintuitively, one of the most powerful ways to reclaim your value when you're triggered is to find a way to value the person who triggered you. That may be by acknowledging your own role in the sit-

uation or by seeing it from the other person's perspective. Fred did both. Once Bianca felt understood, her reflexive response was to take care of Fred. You've likely had this same experience. You apologize to someone you know was upset with you about something, only to have the person suddenly seem more concerned about your welfare. "Oh, it was nothing," she says. "Don't worry about it." When our own value isn't at risk, we much prefer to be in connection with others than in conflict. We're also hardwired to reciprocate. Value another person, and that person is likely to value you back.

A third alternative way to view the world is through the Long Lens. Let's say that whatever triggered you feels threatening and devaluing, even after you've distinguished between the facts and your story about them, and even after you try to see it from the other person's perspective. In short, there's no way to tell a credibly positive story about your circumstances. Perhaps you're working fourteen-hour days on a project, you're exhausted, you barely have time to see your young children, and you can't see any way out. Or maybe you have a boss who is relentlessly critical of you for no good reason you can discern. Or you're stuck in a job you find boring and beneath you, but it's hard for you to imagine finding a better alternative in a bad economy.

*Candide*'s Dr. Pangloss might be able to find "the best of all possible worlds" in such scenarios, but most of us can't. So what realistically optimistic story can you tell when things really *are* grim? The value of the Long Lens is that it provides a way to look out into the future, regardless of what's going on in the present. This can be useful because it turns out we're terrible predictors in the present of how we're going to feel tomorrow, much less six months from now.

"Most of us have a tough time imagining a tomorrow that is terribly different from today," writes Daniel Gilbert in *Stumbling on Happiness*. "We cannot feel good about an imaginary future when we are busy feeling bad about an actual present . . . [W]hen we try to overlook, ignore, or set aside our current gloomy state and make a forecast about how we will feel tomorrow, we find that it's a lot like trying to imagine the taste of marshmallow while chewing liver."

More than half the people in the United States, Gilbert points out, will experience a trauma such as rape, physical assault, or a natural disaster during their lifetimes. Is there any doubt these events are horrific when they happen and difficult to get past? Still, somehow most

of us do, and we cope far better than we could have imagined possible at the time. A series of studies has shown, for example, that those who suffer permanently paralyzing spinal cord injuries ultimately return to levels of happiness nearly equal to those of similarly aged nondisabled people. “The fact is that negative events do affect us,” explains Gilbert, “but they generally don’t affect us as much or for as long as we expect them to.”

The Long Lens is a means of looking past the narrow perspective of the present and being able to imagine a better future. After Lance Armstrong lay close to death from cancer that spread through his body and then miraculously recovered, he wrote these words: “If you asked me to choose between winning the Tour de France or having cancer, I would choose cancer . . . because of what it has done for me as a human being, a man, a husband, a son, and a father. . . . If there is a purpose to the suffering that is cancer, I think it must be this: it’s meant to improve us.”

In the face of facts that seem incontrovertibly grim, we encourage our clients to ask themselves this question: “Regardless of how I feel about what’s happening right now, how can I learn and grow from this experience?” As Alan Mulally, the president and CEO of Ford, told us, referring to the challenge of taking over a company that was nearly bankrupt: “The expectation I tried to set is that you deal with whatever the current reality is, and then you say ‘Okay, so how are we going to move forward?’”

Imagine you lose your job, as so many people have during the past several years. The impact is devastating financially and a harsh blow to your self-confidence. That’s the reality when it happens—but it’s not a permanent reality. The Long Lens may allow you to see the potential for learning, growth, and a better future, despite the current hardship. Forced to slow down, perhaps you take time to focus on what you *really* want for yourself and from your life. Or maybe you decide to try something entrepreneurial that you’ve long been interested in doing but never had the time to pursue. Or you choose to volunteer time to a cause you deeply believe in. Or you use the opportunity to connect more deeply with your family. Along the way, you discover that you *can* cope with severe adversity. Who is to say you won’t emerge stronger and more resilient for what you’ve gone through? Can you think of an example in your life of something that seemed terrible

when it happened but seems trivial in retrospect or actually led to an important opportunity or a positive new direction?

We have vastly more control over how we experience what happens to us—and how we behave as a result—than we ordinarily believe. When we feel threatened, we often weave the facts into stories that confirm our worst fears. But we also have the option to face the facts exactly as they are—to see reality unvarnished, in all its complexity—and then focus on making the most of the life we've been given.

## CHAPTER TWELVE ACTION STEPS

- Think of a recent event or circumstance that triggered you. Write down the facts about what happened—only the facts. Now write down the story you’re telling yourself about those facts. Making this distinction allows us to observe our experience rather than simply reacting to it.
- Using the same event or circumstance, challenge yourself to come up with a more empowering story that makes it possible for you to hold on to your value, despite what’s happened. How, for example, would you respond in this situation from your best self?
- When we’re triggered, we typically revert to telling our stories in terms of black and white, good and bad, hero and villain. These extremes fail to capture the complexity of what’s usually happened. Go back to page 153 and complete the exercise there. Practice acknowledging a part of yourself that is imperfect, without allowing it to define all of who you are. Are you comfortable saying “I am that, but I’m not *only* that?”