

The stories we tell: a narrative approach to coaching



What role do myth, fable and story have in constructing our identity? Narrative coach **Sue MacMillan** demonstrates how we can use stories to help clients gain new insight and understanding and swap unhelpful or harmful scripts for those that offer hope, healing and possibility.

In this postmodern, multi-faceted world where social media invites multiple identities, the face-to-face coaching relationship is special.

It provides a space and time for the client to look inwards and discover new insights that can engender change.

I have always been interested in stories – ever since being read them as a child when ill in hospital. Later, while working as a physiotherapist, I listened to hundreds of people's stories of sickness and healing and, over the years, it became apparent to me that the psychological approach to their injury or illness had an enormous impact on their recovery. I worked in a pain clinic, bringing a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) approach to patients' rehabilitation. However, what became clear was the importance of how these patients became 'chronic pain sufferers' and what was happening in their subconscious minds.

So when I trained to become a coach I was surprised that so little emphasis was placed on the client's history. Having trained as a professional storyteller (at the International School of Storytelling in Hove – www.schoolofstorytelling.com) and worked with the ideas of the Narrative Institute (www.theinstituteofnarrativetherapy.com/) and Human Givens (www.hgi.org.uk/index.htm), the role of narrative has been vital to my development and approach to clients.

'Narrative practices' are based on the idea that the stories we tell about ourselves play a crucial role in our lives. One of the central premises of narrative practice is 'Who we are and what we do are influenced by the stories we tell ourselves'¹ and the ways in which we narrate those experiences have an impact on how we feel and think, how we see ourselves and on our relationships with others. The way in which we think and talk about our experiences can either make problems bigger or help us contemplate new possibilities.

So what is a story?

Essentially a story is an extended metaphor and consists of:

- events
- linked in sequence
- across time
- according to plot.²

Our brains are hardwired for stories. Joseph Campbell,³ the great mythologist, studied myths from around the world and found the constant repetition of themes such as the Hero's Journey showed the universal and eternal truths about mankind and the power of our relationship with story. We think in narrative structure all the time; Jeremy Hsu⁴ found personal stories comprise 65 per cent of our conversations.

Canadian psychologist Raymond Mar⁵ performed an analysis of 86 fMRI studies and concluded that there was substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and those used to navigate interactions with others – in particular, interactions in which we're trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Scientists call this ability to construct a map of other people's intentions 'theory of mind'.⁶ Narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this capacity when we identify with characters' feelings and emotions.

Humans are 'interpreting' beings – we all have experiences out of which we create meaning. The multiple stories we have about our lives involve us linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period – and then finding a way of explaining them that creates meaning. This meaning forms the plot of the story. We live our lives forward and give meaning to our experiences by looking backwards – what I call 'joining the dots' backwards, seeing how the thread weaves events together. I see this particularly in the context of my hospice work, where autobiographical retrospection is heightened.

This is why our memories are so important to our individual sense of self. Brok describes



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how what we remember gives us our sense of self or 'me', referencing Locke's belief that we look for a continuity of consciousness or memory from one moment to the next over a lifetime.⁷

Memory and the past can have an almost mythical quality. Jules Evans⁸ explains how the subconscious uses myth, symbol, metaphor and stories to help organise the psyche.

So our 'back story' is important and it will have been through an extensive selection and editing process in terms of which stories we choose to tell ourselves and others, as well as being influenced by what others tell us.

The story we have experienced will affect our neurobiology in terms of wiring and neurotransmitters. Because different neurotransmitters are released when we experience different emotions, the impact of emotions in coaching cannot be underestimated. We need to understand the emotional landscape in order to get to the root of the issue.

Among our stories there will be dominant ones – stories we tell ourselves, those others tell us or those we tell other people. These are the stories we use to narrate our lives.⁹

Stories are never constructed in isolation from the broader context; they are influenced by those we interact with, such as family →





and friends, but also by gender, class, race, culture, religion etc. I have been described as a 'good driver'. I was also born at a time when women were encouraged to drive, go out to work and be independent. All are powerful contributors to the narrative I have constructed for myself around being a 'good driver', which will have an effect on how I live my life. It not only affects the present but also future actions. So when I was asked to take a job that meant driving long distances alone in another country, I took it, as it fits with the dominant story that I am a good driver. A friend who was constantly told by her partner that she was a poor driver lost her confidence and developed the story that she is a bad driver. She did not accept the job, yet our driving skills were similar and I have had more accidents than her.

Therefore, the meaning we give to events are not neutral in their effects on our lives and they continue to shape them in the future.

Different stories can be told about a single event – we all know that feeling when family or friends reminisce about an event you attended and you hear different interpretations. This depends on what was going on in each storyteller's own world, and what they noticed determined the meaning they made of the experience. No story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction and no single story can encapsulate all the contingencies of life.

We can, however, 're-author' that story if it no longer serves us well, in order to move forwards. The brain's neuroplasticity means it has the ability to change, allowing us to choose a different story and change behaviour patterns.

So how do we apply this to coaching?

A narrative approach to coaching draws on Drake's proposition, based on his observations of clients' unique narration patterns and cognitive and behavioural repertoires: that there are two primary drivers of human behaviour – agency and communion. The main premise is that, if you want people to adopt new behaviours or attain new results, you must help them build an identity through an alternative narrative. To sustain that new identity, people need to enact new behaviours – and the stories that go with them. I tend to break this down into two parts:



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1. Listening to their back-story – looking for dominant stories (which often play out at a subconscious level), attachment patterns (how they form relationships), emotional responses or patterns they are living
2. Techniques that help re-author the stories that are no longer beneficial into an alternative one with new behaviours and patterns.

I start by spending the first session listening to my client's back-story. If that story is no longer serving the client well, by acknowledging we are an 'ongoing autobiography' we can find alternative stories to that dominant one. Once we've found these alternative stories we can begin to develop them. The language and metaphors that the client uses are also important: as we know from Milton Erickson's work, this is a direct line to the client's subconscious mind, and informs us about the narratives they construct.

I would then move on to work on developing alternative stories, accessing the subconscious through creative practices such as:

- drawing out the dominant and then the alternative story
- writing and re-writing the story until it is as the client wants it
- acting out the story through role play
- using objects or card work for the client to create their metaphor to enable them to start to develop an alternative story
- using an existing fairy tale story/myth as a guiding metaphor – clients will interpret their own meaning depending on the words/images used
- creating a story using the client's words and metaphors to encourage pattern matching
- using a re-authoring conversation (see box on right).¹²

A story pattern can parallel our client's experience or problem. As the patterns are already established, a client's imaginative mind can recognise the matching template contained in the story, even if unconsciously. People talk about a story 'speaking' to them at a particular moment. The pattern is registered subconsciously and when a corresponding situation arises the client can recognise it and it can be used to portray a specific pattern of thinking or behaviour. As a result the person gains insight and thence choice and flexibility about previously automatic and unconscious behaviour.¹³

A client, 'John', was thinking about semi retirement at 55, and he came to me for some transition coaching. I asked him to tell me about himself and I let him talk for about 30 minutes, asking questions occasionally to clarify or probe.

John told me about his childhood and particularly about his father, who was a solicitor. John had gone on to train and work as a solicitor himself, as he believed having a profession was a good role model for his children. This was also particularly important to his wife. He had worked in the same firm for 25 years and when I asked him what he enjoyed about his work he found it difficult to think of anything specific.



An example of a re-authoring conversation

Tell me something (or cite something you have noticed or heard them mention in passing) you have done or thought about recently that you are pleased with (something that doesn't fit with the dominant story that is holding them back).

How does this fit with any hopes that you have about how you wish to lead your life?

Can you tell me about another time recently when you did or said something that also fits these intentions?

What does this say about what is important to you? About what you give value to?

Has this only been important to you recently or for a long time?

What might someone have seen you doing back then that would be an expression of these values?

What do all these hopes, intentions and values that you describe say about what you stand for in life? What are you committed to?

If you were to keep these understandings close to you what difference might it make in the next few days or weeks?

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We discussed the outcomes he wanted from the coaching and the possibilities he wanted to explore. As we finished I asked him if I could tell him a story. (Alternatively you could give a story/poem to a client to read later. It is useful to have a bank of stories, poems, books and articles so that you can give one that you feel is relevant to the client that is set in the context of their past and may help them think about the future.)

This is my rendition of the story I told him.¹⁴

There was once a great Hasidic leader called Zusia. One day he came to his followers. His eyes were red with tears and his face was pale with fear.

'Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!'

'Last night I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life.'

The followers were puzzled.

'Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What questions about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer them?'

Zusia turned his gaze to heaven. 'I have learned that the angels will not ask me, "Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?"'

His followers persisted. 'So what will they ask you?'

'And I learned,' Zusia sighed, 'that the angels will not ask me, "Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?"'

One of his followers approached Zusia and faced him squarely. Looking him in the eye, the follower asked, 'But what will they ask you?'

'They will ask me, "Zusia, there was only one thing that no power on heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming." They will say, "Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?"'

John told me that story struck a powerful chord with him. He cites it as the trigger and momentum for the choice he made almost immediately after that first session. He went back to college and trained as a landscape gardener - something he had always wanted to do. I saw him twice more to help him map out that transition. In our last session he told me that much of his belief structure had also shifted with the story. This illustrates how the use of the creative imagination and visual imagery - and in particular recognising the characters that populate inner stories - can help people grow and develop and become more effective in their work. Neuroscientist Mary Helen Imordino-Yang¹⁵ found that when we hear an inspiring story more blood flows to our brain stem - the part that keeps us breathing and alive. This makes us literally feel inspiration on the substrate of our own biological survival.

David Rocks¹⁶ researched brain activity during coaching sessions using MRI and developed the ARIA model, as follows.

Once a story or our thinking has our attention it begins to raise our awareness of issues. As we reflect (subconsciously), alpha waves are stimulated, serotonin is released producing a relaxation and we start to think in a different way, more internally. It is the deeper meaning of the metaphorical message, which our unconscious mind absorbs when a story is told. The more it's told with the use of language patterns, vocal inflections, emotion etc the more entranced we become - almost a REM trance state.¹⁷ We use the parts of the brain that connect the left (logical) and right (creative) hemispheres, tapping into more intelligence.

Then, as we start to gain insight illumination, adrenalin is released and strong gamma-band waves are found in all parts of the brain as it simultaneously processes information across different regions. What happens next is wide open to suggestion: the powerful message in a story will either be matched to a pre-existing pattern (and thus reinforce it) or the brain →



will form a brand new template to re-author the story into one that is more helpful for them. This then leads to a desire for Action, which is important to support so the motivation generated in the illumination phase is not lost. We need to list specific actions and timetable them.

Using story, metaphor and images in coaching enhances the client's flexibility of thinking. It is up to the client how they interpret a story – they do the thinking and therefore own the observation and possibilities themselves. These approaches raise a client's awareness of how they interpret things and give meaning to events, which ultimately affects their behaviours. It enables clients to take a fresh look at their life and find new significance and fascination in neglected events, so helping them find solutions to problems by choosing to view old events in a different light and to shine the torch more strongly on others. ■

Sue MacMillan is a master coach and professional storyteller working with individuals and organisations using a narrative approach. She has recently worked with the YMCA training staff to bring a coaching approach to their work with clients, and she regularly leads 'Storytelling for Influence' workshops, helping participants to craft personal stories.

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