



## The Hazards Of Old Stories

*As we envision a new life, the challenge is often to distinguish the stories that bring us to life from the stories that simply diminish us. And, to be attuned of the differences.*

**By Dennis Coyne**

For years, Mary has dutifully been the head of her household, and a single parent for her two sons. Her focus has been to earn a living, to support herself and her children. While Mary's career has been satisfying, sometimes even exciting, it has often been all consuming, leaving her little time for herself.

### **Mary Simply Says That She Is In Transition – From Earning A Living, To Learning To Live**

Now her children are grown, married and have children of their own. At mid-life, Mary asks herself, "What's next?" Having set her course for the benefit of others for so long, how can she now set a course of her own?

As we begin to work together, Mary tells me that she has recently enrolled in several classes - a creative writing class, a drawing class, and a poetry class. She sends me excerpts of what she has written, and promises photos of what she has painted. Mary is excited. The depression that dogged her so many years seems to be lifting. In a matter-of-fact way, Mary simply says that she is in transition - from earning a living, to learning to live.

### **Too Often, My Clients Fail To Be Contemporaries Of Their Own Lives**

And yet, in our conversations, it's all too easy for Mary to slip into her old story line – the story about taking care of others before caring for herself, and not having a life of her own. So, for example, after telling me about her writing or painting, she often sighs and shrugs her shoulders, commenting that she so seldom attends to her own interests. And in making such a comment, Mary ignores all that she has done in recent months for herself, and slips unwittingly into an all-too-familiar story line from the past.

And what is the cost of Mary's old story line? It's getting mired in the behavior of the past, while undermining the new behavior that she prizes these days. But, in looking over her shoulder and describing herself in past terms, Mary has lots of company.

Too often my clients fail to be a contemporary of their own lives. It's not intentional; it's simply habitual. It's as though they are attempting to steer their lives, by fixing their gaze rearward. Unless they are careful, the past will remain prologue for these people. They will be no more able to chart a new path, or reach their destination, than a driver who drives a car, eyes glued to the rear view mirror.

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### **The Challenge Is To Distinguish The Stories That Bring Us To Life From The Stories That Simply Diminish Us**

If we think about it, we realize that we define ourselves in the stories we tell. We recognize ourselves in our stories, and our families and friends do, as well. So, our old friends might sometimes say: “You haven’t changed a bit.”

From time to time, there is a comfort in the re-telling of these tales, as we recount our accomplishments and reveal the best in us. Yet, other stories speak to our past limitations and frustrations, and the outcomes that have disappointed us. The challenge is to distinguish the stories that bring us to life from the stories that simply diminish us, and to be attuned of the difference. Telling our stories is like setting our sails, as the poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox observed in the following verse:

One ship drives east and another drives west  
With the self-same winds that blow.  
Tis the set of the sails  
And not the gales  
That tells them the way to go.

From time to time, we all want to do some things differently, to set our sails in a new direction. After all, that is what Mary wants to do, as she learns to have more of a life of her own. So, what might Mary do, to realize more fully to live a life of her own?

### **Be Clear About The New Story, Enlist People In It, And Ask At Least One Person To Spot You When You (Inevitably) Trot Out An Old Story That Serves You No Longer**

First, Mary needs to be clear about the life she wants to live. For Mary, the creative arts play a central role. She also wants to have more of an adult relationship with her children, and more of a presence in the lives of her grandchildren. So, in addition to the art classes, Mary is taking an extended vacation with her son and his family, and is scheduled to spend time with her other grandchildren upon her return from vacation. As Mary recounts these experiences, she will be a contemporary of her experience and able to celebrate what she is accomplishing.

Second, Mary needs to be reminded when she unwittingly slips back into telling old stories that limit her ability to live more fully. In our coaching conversations, Mary knows that I will spot the old stories that serve only to dampen her ability to live more of a life of her own. Oftentimes, Mary will stop midway in an old cramped story, and laugh, noting that she knows better than to retell a story that simply diminishes her. The more Mary has an appetite for a future different than her past, the more she will be mindful to weed-out the old stories that threaten her resolve to do things differently.

In the opening lines of her poem, *Now I Become Myself*, May Sarton described people like Mary in the following words:

Now I become myself. It’s taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people’s faces,

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I wish you well when the time comes to put aside an old story for a new one. My advice is to be clear about the new story, enlist people in it, and ask at least one person to spot you when you (inevitably) trot out an old story that serves you no longer. In that way, you can set a new direction in your life and author the chapter ahead, as Mary is doing, day by day, and conversation by conversation. ■



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