



Update Your Personal Narrative

And pay attention to the narratives of others

By Dennis Coyne

Coaching clients want to see results. Typically, they come to the coaching conversation with an objective in mind, for example, finding a job that suits them better. They are ready to roll, but often don't know how or where to start. Yet one thing is clear—clients want to use their time in practical ways. I have been told by more than one lawyer “No touchy-feely stuff, please. No airy-fairy.”

But how do we define what is practical or useful as a client struggles to get traction and move in a different way, or achieve a different outcome? Of course, the answer varies from client to client. But as lawyers, we're wordsmiths: We live in and achieve results through language, which is the currency of our trade. For example, a client tells us the facts of her dispute, and we craft those facts into a narrative that reflects legal principles and assures her the best possible outcome. In doing so, we choose our words carefully. Like painters, we apply our words like watercolors to paper. The words we choose color the dispute, and put the client in the best possible light.

We Live Within The Stories We Create

We also create narratives for ourselves, and live within those stories. Sometimes the stories are cobbled together from bits and pieces of old stories that we have lived with for years. For example, years ago someone may have described you as unskilled or unfit in some particular way. You may still live in that assessment, even though you mastered that skill long ago. These narratives are no longer accurate, and they no longer serve you, assuming they ever did. In fact, such narratives can defeat you if you want to achieve something beyond the confines of the old narrative. (For more about old narratives, read “The Hazards of Old Stories” in *The Complete Lawyer*, Vol 2, No. 1.)

Other narratives are future-oriented and are inspired by our aspirations. These narratives are practical because they are a bridge to the future, helping us to move from who and where we are to where and how we want to be. This work of building such a narrative is like placing stepping-stones on a path to the future.

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Narratives Form Slowly And Become Paths To The Future

Typically, a new narrative forms slowly, conversation-by-conversation. Sometimes, it begins with an awareness of a single word that comes to mind and sticks like gum on the sole of a shoe. When that happens, it's best to simply live with the word until you're able to understand its relevance to the intersection where you find yourself, and how that word may be a building block of the new narrative forming in you.

I have two examples of words that became the building blocks of a new narrative for me; they became part of a new narrative that supported my transition from full-time lawyer to my current role as a career coach.

They are ordinary words. You likely learned them in grade school, as I did. But until I heard them spoken in my adult life, these words were not part of my working vocabulary or part of my narrative.

Listen For Key Words

The first word is "longing." I heard this word, as never before, when someone read the words of David Whyte's poem "Self-Portrait." The line that made all the difference to me was this simple statement: "I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living, falling toward the center of your longing."

As a lawyer, especially as a litigator, it never had occurred to me to do anything other than push, strive, drive, manipulate, and win. I was always active, and I typically used active verbs. The concept of yielding, falling, being drawn toward something, or falling toward the center of my longing was foreign to me, and provoked me. And so I began to puzzle about whether there was something I longed for and, if so, what it might mean to yield to it, and to allow it to become part of a new narrative.

Eventually, I came to realize that I treasured conversations, particularly those conversations in which I could help people better understand themselves, and identify resources to support them along the way. Years later, I learned that this is what a career coach does.

The second word is "passion." I can remember Frederic Hudson, my teacher at the Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara where I received certification as a career coach, speaking of passion as a quality of life. He said that passion could be found in the work we do. At the time, I was not only a student at the Hudson Institute, but also a shareholder at a major

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law firm. The concept of living a passionate life seemed odd to me. I couldn't imagine passion and my law practice co-existing. I simply dismissed that idea all together, concluding that passion was a Southern California phenomenon, and had no relevance to me.

But two weeks later, I found myself standing in line for brunch at a Philadelphia restaurant, telling the chef how I wanted my omelet prepared, and hearing him explain that he was passionate about cooking. Holy cow, there was passion in Philadelphia too!

I began to wonder about these people who lived with passion, particularly those whose livelihood incorporated passion. Was passion a quality that could be part of my everyday life? Or was I simply too old, too Midwestern, too lawyerly, or too Norwegian for that to happen? Happily, I found that it is possible for me, particularly in my work as a career coach.

Song Lyrics Can Seed A Narrative

Sometimes, a melody or lyric can kick start a new narrative. One day, for example, I found myself repeating the lyrics from "If Ever I Would Leave You," a song from the Broadway musical "Camelot" that I hadn't heard for decades. The singer questions when he might ever leave a relationship he's in, and concludes, "Oh, no, not in springtime, summer, winter, or fall. No never could I leave you at all."

When I became aware of this lyric circling in my head, I couldn't make any sense of it. I knew of no relationship that I wanted to leave, or that I needed to affirm. Much later, it occurred to me that I might be the one who feared being left behind. At the time, my transition to being a career coach was more of a challenge than I had anticipated. Would I stay the course, or would I abandon the dream of making this transition? Once I incorporated my commitment to see the dream through, it became part of my narrative. I had more confidence that I could stay the course. And I have.

Crafting A Narrative Is A Group Effort

Finally, the crafting of a new narrative is not done alone. Rather, we do this work in the company of those who challenge and inspire us to believe in ourselves—friends, family, and teachers. Sometimes a career coach is also a resource, informing the client about the experience of other adults, and introducing the client to the literature of adult development.

If you are not forming a new narrative for yourself, listen for the narratives voiced by others. What do your clients want you to accomplish on their behalf? If you understand them and

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what they want, you'll be better able to serve them—and satisfied clients are your best source of referrals.

Remember to listen to your associates as well, to what they are telling you about who they are and what they need. Associate retention is dramatically influenced by whether associates feel heard.

Listen for narratives—your own and those of others. It's not only practical, but foolhardy not to.



Dennis Coyne has practiced law for thirty-five years, most recently as a shareholder in a major Minnesota law firm. He is also a certified Hudson Institute life coach. Dennis works principally with lawyers as they learn to better align their values with their busy schedules. He serves as adjunct faculty in the Masters of Arts program in Human Development at St. Mary's College, and teaches environmental law at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. For many years he has convened a highly acclaimed seminar: "Our Challenge – To Thrive in Our Chosen Profession." In 2005, Dennis joined with Hamline Law School to present a series of CLE's entitled: "The Courage to Teach Law with Integrity." Dennis can be reached at Coyne Coaching and Consulting, LLC, at (612) 375-0155 or dcoyne@denniscoyne.com.