

Question Your Narrative Choose Your Adventure

ESSAYS ON THE STORIES WE TELL & 100 DAYS OF JOURNALING PROMPTS

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ESSAYS

on the stories we tell

Telling Tales Tells All

A friend said to me recently that human beings are meaning makers in response to my saying that we are story-telling creatures. It's true, we view the world and the things in it and assign meaning to everything. Meanwhile, our subconscious/lizard brain uses over-simplified yes-or-no/friend-or-foe logic in a constant search for patterns it can interpret as safety/security.

Our basic storytelling instinct, the place where fairy tales are born, is found at the intersection of logic and meaning. From the time that we are very small we learn certain storylines which we use to communicate who we are and connect with the people around us. In fact, there are two basic setups with a minimal cast of characters.

The Instinctual Stories

First, we have the story of being Distressed. This can be a hapless victim-type situation where we don't understand why someone was angry or even mean with us. There's also the standard something-upsetting-has-just-happened-and-I-just-need-to-talk-about-it/victim-of-life story which we use for commiserating because we usually tell these stories to people we know or believe have been in a similar situation and are likely to understand (a belief proved true when the other person shares a story of a similar hurt).

Second, there are the stories of our great Heroics. These are the stories we tell to make ourselves look good because we did something good or cool. Everybody wants to be good and or cool in a given situation, because that means you fit in (thank you, nobody-likes-a-downer society).

The Cast of Characters

When we tell stories about ourselves there are roles that need filling, knowing where you're putting people - or where others are putting you - helps all of us tell better, more human stories.

The Adoring Peasantry is anyone you setup as a witness in your story, someone who saw you do that good/cool thing or saw that other person being mean to you or say something ridiculous right to your face. This character is a way of giving a secondhand testimonial of your coolness, because coolness doesn't count unless there are witnesses.

The Villain/Challenger is anyone in opposition to you in a story, someone whose perspective you're not in the mood to consider because it might mean admitting

you're wrong about something which might mean discovering something about yourself that isn't good or cool.

The Distressed/Heroic is always you. It's you when something happens to you and you need to commiserate and bond with someone over your hurt. It's you when you do something good or cool. It's you when you're in the wrong, but you don't know it so you instinctually spin the tale to make yourself look good. It's you when you discover you're wrong and retell the story for commiserating purposes or to take ownership of your mistake and make your life-learning opportunity into a new story of striving to be good and cool.

The Conclusions We Draw

Once we see the basic story patterns we use to talk about ourselves, once we see how we cast the roles to always give ourselves the stunning lead, what do we do?

We ask ourselves the tough questions, the rough questions, the questions that send us tumbling into one quest after the next.

Am I telling stories that give others the benefit of the doubt, leaving room for my challengers to be right? Am I telling stories that limit my ability to accept my mistakes and grow from them? Are you?

Tell The Tale You Want To Hear

Winter is easily the time of tales as the nights lengthen and people bundle together to warm one another with laughter. Yet clearly summer won't be denied as folks go out into the dark in search of bonfires and accommodating winds. We seek the cooler parts of nature to give us an excuse to draw close and have our silences filled with the stories of others.

No one person can experience everything except by the use of their imagination, and still that needs a little nudging from good books and movies and friends. We have a never-ending supply of stories to entertain us, but what story do we choose? We know the stories and characters that can be told, but what do we want to hear?

It goes back to warmth. It goes to pulling in close to one another to give each other more than warmth, we bolster one another, give one another strength. We strengthen ourselves with the stories which draw us in the deepest.

Playing Favorites

When the tales we tell about ourselves always portray us as the hero or the victim, it's easy to think we take all our strength from the hero tales. A victim is someone at the mercy of the world around them, of the people around them. A hero takes action, takes control of the story not yet finished and makes things happen.

You and I both know that hero tales can take a terrible turn when the person telling the story doesn't realize that how they've acted out their values upon the world caused harm and that memorializing it proudly is cause for concern. Both kinds of stories - hero and victim - have their faults, and both have their virtues. In the virtuous sense, the sense we crave, it might be better to think of them not as heroes and victims but as journeymen and apprentices.

Journeyman Tales

When a film is billed as a coming-of-age story, they're talking about a journeyman making his way or place in the world. The origin of the word journeyman refers to an individual day-laborer, someone you'd hire for work for the day. Yet the meaning of the word evolved as the hired hands became better skilled and were consistently reliable. A true journeyman will never want for work because they are known and trusted and produce the right results.

In the stories we crave, a journeyman would be someone trustworthy who takes action, gets results, and grows from their experiences. Heroes are too high above the rabble to be taken seriously as an example for how we should live, too static even as

they are always on top of things and seem to have been born perfectly capable. Journeymen give us implicit permission to take charge even as we are trying to figure things out, to make mistakes and not lose faith in our path.

Apprentice Tales

Since we know that every story we tell is a hero story or victim story, then we also know that coming-of-age stories need their own counter-partner; initiation stories. While coming-of-age stories are about coming into your own and staking a claim in this crazy world, initiation stories deal with learning about this world that we live in and certain things we must do (because of societal rules and laws of physics) in order to keep going. Apprentices — as I'm sure you know — are students, beholden to the master-worker who is teaching them and severely limited in their ability to affect change in the world around them.

So then why crave apprentice tales? What can we gain from being reminded “this is how the world works and you just have to deal with it”? An apprentice has to shift their mindset in order to take in the life lesson, and by listening to or watching their story we get to experience that shift with them. A storytelling experience happens to us and afterward we get to face the world with our eyes opened a little wider.

When the Tale is Told

It's so easy, so instinctual that all the stories we tell be of our heroics or how we were made victims. But life - being so much more dynamic than good and evil - requires stories that lead to more stories that lead to more stories. We take action and get what we want or don't and have to adjust our strategy as we take action again; something happens to us and we learn from it and use that learning later when we are in a position to take action.

The hero/victim framework serves us well to make friends. Let the journeyman/apprentice add-on help us to make progress in our own lives, the lives of those around us, and — ultimately — this crazy world.

100 DAYS

of journaling prompts

1

Who do you think people see when words are falling out of your face? Are they seeing you as a whole, magically privy to all your good intentions? Is their perception skewed by their own experience of communicating with people, the good and the bad?

2

What are you struggling with right now? Is it a long-standing pattern in your life, a variation on a theme? Are you white-knuckling your way through, or have you found a way to embrace the struggle?

3

When do you feel you're in the right place? Are you waiting for that special circumstance to signal you're free? Are you declaring your own freedom even as you read this, today and every day?

4

Where do you think you're going? Are you chasing after some promise ever out of reach, or running away from some ever-haunting fear? What will it take for you to hold still and make the most of what you have?

5

Why are you doing this? Are you adapting or hiding? Are you where you want to be or struggling to fit in?

6

Who do you want to be? When you emulate others are you trying to copy them or cherry-picking the actions and qualities that feel right to you? How do you tell the difference?

7

What are you trying to say? How important is it that you're understood? Would you rather sound like a genius or choose your words wisely?

8

When is the right time to do the thing? Will you know it in your gut or do you have some sort of barometer in place? Will you act impulsively or make yourself wait to prove to yourself this act is worthy of you?

9

Where are you right now? Are you letting yourself be held down by your past, or holding still in the hope that time will follow your lead? Are you really here and making solid progress, or are you ignoring your needs to maintain a snail-pace forward march?

10

Why make things difficult for yourself? Are you preparing yourself for the greater tasks ahead, or giving excuses to avoid them? How does building up the "daily difficulties" affect how we view those that really matter?

11

Who is in your way? Is it the professors and therapists and bosses and the rest of the whole host of societal gatekeepers? Or is it you for not choosing to forge a path around them?

12

What path are you choosing today, the path of pins or of needles? Are you choosing to keep hold of the reigns, or to hand them off to someone else? How sure are you of how the story will play out and your role in it?

13

When are you giving up on people? Does it take one act or speech to lose you, or does it take a constellation of upset? Can you find no comfort, no benefit in persisting?

14

Where do you begin? Do you follow the lead when someone calls “Over Here!” in need of assistance or solidarity? Do you follow an instinct you can’t shake to that one possibility you can’t get out of your thoughts?

15

Why are you able to persist? Are you getting up in the morning because you are spurred on by your own innate goodness, or by the knowledge of the beautiful souls who still surround you? How do you pick what point on the horizon to focus on and how are you making your way toward it?

16

Who do you need to be today? Do you need it for yourself or someone else? Can you give yourself what you need and trust that others will follow your lead?

17

What have you decided to hold fast to? Are you clinging to a tradition or a morality? Have you decided to avoid the difficulty of questioning the individual things you don't agree with in favor of the ease of following every rule given to you?

18

When are you putting the breaks on your learning? Are you hitting a research saturation point, or getting frustrated with a lack of forward progress, or simply giving up on a given challenge? How can you learn from this to persist in your growing?

19

Where are you getting the idea of who you are and who you're not? Where did you falter in your steps and decide your fate was sealed? Where can you go to remind yourself to keep growing?

20

Why hide yourself away under the guise of "busy"? Why don't you reach out - just once - to someone who cares and ask them to force you outside periodically? Is there some part of you that actually believes you can hide from yourself and remain human?

21

Who do you give your power? Are you giving it to them to feel taken care of or to displace the blame? How easy was it to give away, did you not even notice the exchange?

22

What have you done? Are you sure you're taking ownership of every single one of your decisions? What about the act of deciding on inaction?

23

When was the last time you faced off against yourself? Was it an out-and-out battle with yourself from start to finish? Or was there a point where you took the role of parent and gave fear the role of child and brought it gently with you?

24

Where are you giving thanks? How is your gratitude turning into action? How are you living so that your thankfulness becomes the thanks of another?

25

Why do anything if not because you love something? Why are you crying and laughing and living? What's making any try worth your time?

26

Who are the characters in the stories you tell? How do you change your voice when you repeat their words? Are you really telling a story, or are you trying to control others' perceptions of you?

27

What does your world look like? Is it pressing in on you with nowhere to turn save for some predetermined path, or does it reach in every direction with possibility? How exactly do you stand with your given set of circumstances?

28

When will you get to breathe easy? Are you waiting for some signal that you've reached your final destination? What would it mean if you chose to breathe easy right here, right now?

29

Where are you putting all of your energy? Is this the place of your focus and purpose, or a noble distraction that allows you to keep your true priority in safe obscurity? Are you getting down to business or taking care of busyness?

30

Why fear what others will say and think? How do we really know they're judging us for us and not for some projection of themselves? How much more light can we let in if we purposefully make a few more cracks?

31

Who are you today? Are you the version of yourself always trying to get back to what you were, or the version trying to outrun it, distracted from taking steps forward? How do you keep yourself in the here and now, focused on how today leads into tomorrow?

32

What are others saying about you? How familiar are you with their words? How are you ensuring you can make out your own self-defining over all that ruckus?

33

When are you taking time out for yourself? Are you waiting till you hit a saturation point and can no longer stand to be around others, or planning ahead to rest up and just be yourself? How does your level of comfort when you're alone affect your ability to take care of yourself?

34

Where are you looking for guidance? Are you focusing in on someone else's trajectory as the be all end all of how to get where you want to go, or as more a set of guidelines than actual rules? Are you looking for absolutes or for possibilities?

35

Why doubt and criticize yourself? Why act like "I don't know" is an answer and not an invitation to grow? Why treat every answer you give as a final answer?

36

Who taught you to be trapped by your circumstances? Who told you things don't change because people don't change? What could you do if you simply changed your mind?

37

What are you giving with the expectation of receiving? What might you give instead that could never be repaid? What prevailing thought stops you from such generosity?

38

When will you show thanks? Will you be grateful when everything you want has been acquired? Is there anything you have now that the having allows you to move forward and for which you can be thankful?

39

Where are you looking for inspiration? Is your attention focused on the beauty that surrounds you, or the strength you've already proven you possess within? Is there a way to keep them both in view?

40

Why are you not doing what you're not doing? Is it a lack of desire or a feeling of fear or a deficit of willpower? How does the reason for not doing affect the actions you do take?

41

Who benefits when you give all you have to give? How much of what you give are you giving to yourself? How much more would you have to give and to help others if you gave to yourself first?

42

What is your next step? Are you happy to keep on wishing, or will your wishing get you reaching? How do you want your story to play out?

43

When is the best time to arrive at your intended destination? Would you rather arrive after everything has gone smoothly with nothing of interest to report, or after a few trials and errors have tested your patience and wits so that your eventual arrival is met with a sense of release? How can you reach for smoothness and remain open to your own stories?

44

Where did you most learn how to speak to yourself? Did you learn it from those who insulted you, encouraged you, spoke openly of their own self-perceptions? How far back do you need to go to take control of your story?

45

Why are you holding on to the things that hurt? Are you holding out for the day that those you blame will finally give you that sincerest of apologies? Can you not say “this is the lesson that comes from the hurt” and hold on to that and let the rest go?

46

Who will you choose to be in your story today? Will you play the victim hindered by those fears and doubts you view as a villain in need of defeating? Or will you be the hero struggling first against yourself and then with yourself as you make your way through momentary failures and losses until you at last win something worthy of you?

47

What sights and sounds are filling you with joy? How exactly do they make you feel? How can you recreate that sensation when you inevitably need healing later?

48

When will you be ready? Are you even headed to a finish line of learning, or do you just keep pushing it farther out to excuse your inaction? How much can you do with what you know right now just to get the ball rolling?

49

Where do you aspire to be? Are you planning to get there a little at a time taking every action you possibly can, or to wait for those special circumstances outside your control which will allow you to skip to the end? How much further could you go taking the path of little resistances?

50

Why hesitate to make your own rules or adjust those already in place? Why avoid setting the precedent that necessity does not excuse misery? How do you answer the challenge of reconciling the acts of honoring your social contracts and standing your ground?

51

Who says you're done questing? Who decides you're done learning and growing? Who is the villain who can never be defeated, only mastered?

52

What hole are you aching to fill right now? What is the absolute first step you can take in the direction of that craving? What is stopping you from taking that one step?

53

When do you go deeper, broader? When do you get past the surface details and start working on the broad strokes? Is that when the real work begins?

54

Where will you turn if things don't go according to plan? Will you scour the source of your plan for details you might have missed, ready to blame that source so you don't have to feel quite so bad about failing? Where in the plan do you become the source and take control and do things no one will ever see coming?

55

Why rise to the challenge? Why work the angles? Why is it important for you to find a way through to the end of your quest?

56

Who are you right now? Who will you be if you remain exactly as you are while the rest of the world keeps turning and growing? Who could you be if you allowed yourself to grow, too?

57

What does it look like for you to be at home? Are you in some special place where everything is just so? How can you make everything just so in your own skin so you can be at home wherever you go?

58

When does your memory stop being fallible? When does your perception leave room for others to speak? How do you hold on to your sense of self without infringing on someone else's?

59

Where are you seeking to be richer than you are? Your purse, your table, your relationships? Where can you give of yourself right now and instantaneously receive a little more richness in your life?

60

Why does it matter if you do it right? Why does it matter if you make it right? How do you decide what's right for you and stand by that decision?

61

Who has your undivided attention? Are you watching them because of where they are, what they've done or why they did it? How do you like to think you'd introduce yourself to them if you ever met face-to-face?

62

What's going on in your head as you move forward? Do you find yourself looking back for laurels to rest on, or beating yourself up over what still needs doing? Are you focused on closing the gap, or on building a foundation sure enough to make any "gap" irrelevant?

63

When are you really listening to others? Do you listen when they overflow with infectious enthusiasm for their projects, or when every word of doubt tastes of poison? How do you safeguard yourself and remain present with them, or is complete vulnerability the only thing that ensures you hear every word?

64

Where are you coming from? Where did all the people in your path today come from? Where do you think you're all going after your paths are done crossing?

65

Why eat or breathe or sleep? Why enjoy a good meal or sigh with relief or dream? How do you know you're alive?

66

Who do you want to be? Do you want to be the best version of yourself, or an imitation of someone else's best? How can you take your admiration to the next level, and go from flatterer to original?

67

What are you hoping to learn? What makes you think you don't already know the answer? What do you need to bridge the gap between thinking and knowing?

68

When do you let your mind wander? Are you letting your mind wander only when you need to escape, or have you carved out a special time just to let your thoughts be free? How can you practice letting your thoughts just be what they will be today?

69

Where do you want to go? Where will you have to go first to get there? Where do you need to be right now?

70

Why don't you speak up? Why wait for someone to say what you're thinking when you could be saying it right now? How long have you been waiting and listening so far?

71

Who are you waiting to be? Do you really think you need the right set of circumstances, or do you know that you can create those circumstances? How can you be — in this moment — the person you want to be?

72

What are you waiting for? Do you really need to know all there is to know before you can take a single step? What do you know already that you can act on right now?

73

When are you making changes? Are you regularly and steadily making progress, or interested only in big and bombastic transformations, or do you take the need to change for granted to let things happen on their own? How do you feel the moment you realize you've gone for days or months or even years without a single change?

74

Where are you trying? Where are you opening yourself up to more? Where do you think possibilities come from when you get stuck?

75

Why are you so worried, so scared? Have you ever stopped to consider your worries are anchored to your survival instincts (physical, social, procreative)? How can you remind yourself from time to time that everyone else is fearfully acting according to these survival instincts, too?

76

Who will get your attention today, your focus? Are you making that decision out of habit, or are you mixing things up? How will you maintain your resolve, whatever you decide?

77

What gives your life meaning? Your choices or your beliefs? What's the difference?

78

When do you decide to stand your ground? Do you have to hit a kind of saturation point of not being able to take anymore, or do you hit the ground running with standards and no-exceptions priorities? How do the two methods work together in your life, and how can you make your process better?

79

Where are you going today? How are you getting there? How will you be there?

80

Why do the rules continue to make us feel safe even when we look and see the results are wildly different? How appealing are the patterns that the rules are designed to uphold? How appealing is it to demand change?

81

Who are you when you are calm? Who are you when frustration makes your blood boil? Who are you, or could you be, when the two extremes are in balance?

82

What story are you telling yourself today? Is your focus on how things have always been, or how they could be? Are you taking a break from heroics to process and self-soothe, or are you breaking out of a loop of self-soothing-turned-wallowing?

83

When will you be happy? Will you be happy when circumstances allow, or when you choose? How are you pursuing your happiness?

84

Where are you taking yourself? Back into your comfort zone, a little past its borderline, or right to the point of no return? Which destination will best serve your dream today?

85

Why rush on in search of an absolute? Why not sit and breathe and enjoy what's here however uncertain it may be? Why seek and strive to fight and generally avoid spending time with yourself?

86

Who do you think you are? Who had to come before so you could be here now? Who are you making the way for?

87

What pulls you? What seeming magic makes the mundane work worthy? what unglamorous thing are you willing to do to get at your magic?

88

When will you know you have arrived? Are you awaiting an outward sign, or working with a timeline, or choosing to arrive in every step? How are you dancing each such dance?

89

Where would you rather be? Would you rather be on a quest, learning and growing; or, cozied up to fear, moments away from dying of boredom? Where is “happily ever after” really?

90

Why are you still here? Why do you keep looking and reading and doing? Why aren't you somewhere else, doing something else?

91

Who are you trying to better? Who can you compete with who will never blindside you by moving the finish line or just plain moving off the field of play? Who better to compete with than that face in the mirror who has no end of challenges for you to face?

92

What will you do next time? Will there be a next time, or will you avoid this particular challenge forever after? What is the plan when your current plan goes awry?

93

When will you say today is the day? Is it on your calendar or somewhere in the periphery? When do you stop making excuses and start making plans?

94

Where will you go doing the same things, living the same day, every day? Where is there to go but right where you are right now? Where do you want “right here” to be?

95

Why lose hope? How is hopelessness possible when life continuing on is itself a reminder that there is more to be tried? How does that possibility factor into the decisions you make moving forward?

96

Who are you? Who will you decide to be today? How do you go from one to the next?

97

What don't you want to do anymore? What do you want to do more of? How might you crowd out the former with the latter?

98

When do you say enough is enough? When do you demand change? When do you create change?

99

Where can you go? Where do you want to go? Where do you see a difference?

100

Why go back? Why try to recapture something that is already gone? Why not try to build on what came before?