

HEROES OF OUR OWN STORIES

It goes back over twenty years, to a month or so after my divorce. I was sitting chatting with my mom and she brought up certain things about my former wife. They had always gotten along well and mom's criticisms of her were not harsh but they were criticisms. I stopped her and said: "You know mom, she and her mom might be sitting around at this very moment and having a similar conversation, yet I would be the bad guy."

When someone is fired, they will tell themselves about how unjustified it was while at the same time their boss feels just the opposite. In any one of a number of instances when someone fails, I would bet that for most, they tell themselves a story that pretty much removes the main responsibility for their failure from themselves. "How could they do this to me" is the usual thought. It is not, "he had every reason to fire me" or "if I were my wife/girlfriend, I would have done just what they did, I deserved it."

As we get older, we create a narrative, a story, we tell ourselves about the significant events that happen to us as we experience the inevitable ups and downs that accompany our strivings to fulfill our wishes and our desires to make a good life for ourselves. In the main we are the heroes of the stories that we create. The achievements are the results of our efforts, yet the failures are: "they did this to me."

Without a doubt however, for most of the failures the "they" who did these things to "you" felt completely justified in their own actions. Two people looking at the exact same set of facts and coming to very different conclusions, as the saying goes: "reasonable people will disagree." We all make ourselves heroes of our own stories.

From one perspective this process has its benefits. We are absolved of carrying around the loss of self-esteem and self-loathing for admitting that we made a mess of our lives. We preserve a positive sense of self and our pride in who we are. Yet, if only from a probability standpoint, as much as we hate to admit it, now and then the other side may be right and we may be wrong. Maybe, just maybe it was our own failings that led to our being fired or our husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend telling us to hit the road.

In those times when we fully deserved to fail, if we delude ourselves into thinking we did nothing wrong, the consequences of a “hero story” can be very destructive and perpetuate our failing time and time again. In both my careers, academic medicine and venture capital, certainly there were ups and downs. Yet, I believe an objective analysis would show that over many years the trend was up. The fact that it went up I owe in the main to one of my inborn traits. That trait is a way of looking at things, an objective and quantitative view toward the world. Certainly I had emotions that colored my thinking, but in general I would always temper these “attitudes” with an objective assessment of events—for those of you old enough to remember the original *Star Trek*, I always felt Mr. Spock was a kindred spirit: “That is highly illogical captain.” I must confess that during my business career a friend confided in me that a mutual friend once told him that I had “icewater” in my veins.

I too wanted to make myself a hero of all my stories; it was my knee-jerk reaction to any failure. However, a few moments later I had to admit to myself that most of the time the facts suggested otherwise. The result was a great deal of self-reflection trying to understand what I did to cause the failure. I did not think about the other guy as the bad guy. I openly accepted I did something wrong. Of course the next thought was, how can

I improve. What should I do the next time I am in this type of situation, so the next time I will succeed and not fail.

You see, always blaming the other guy is not very pragmatic. It can only lead to more failure, stuck in an ongoing rut of disappointment. You have no ability to change the other people you will meet in your life who will have an impact over your life. The only person you can change is yourself. You must reshape yourself in relationship to the others around you if you want to reach your goal.

It is not only those cases where there is a clean separation of success or failure that one must pursue a self-analysis of your role in the outcome. Many times a success could have been even greater if you had handled it differently. Similarly, a failure that was doomed to be a failure but might have been mitigated or when the failure occurred you could have ended up positioned to move on in a positive way.

Another aspect of our need to make ourselves the heroes of our life's narrative is its impact upon how we perceive other people. Many things that happen in our lives are ambiguous. Is that glass half-full or half-empty? Which description we choose to describe how much water is in the glass is dependent upon the mood we are in. A bright ebullient mood and the glass is half full; a dour and sullen mood it is half empty. Our perception of the events and people around us are at times not objective, but a perception that is first passed through the filter of our mood, the fog of emotion. From a purely practical standpoint it is the response we give based upon this distorted perception that gets us into trouble.

Our need to be the heroes of our story is one of the main distorting influences upon our perception of other people. In order to defend our own lifestyle, attitudes, and

achievements, another person whose own lifestyle, attitudes, and achievements might diminish or make us question our own, must be put-down as way to preserve our own status. Thus the story we tell ourselves about others, how we perceive them, may be more fantasy than fact. A fantasy driven by our own need to see others in a certain light in order to preserve our belief in our own story about ourselves.

The stories we tell ourselves about the events and people of our lives are always a mix of fact and fiction. It is only natural that we try to preserve our self-esteem by looking elsewhere for the reasons for our troubles and perceiving people in ways that make us look better. However, whether it is in business or personal relationships, the more accurate the facts upon which we base our decisions, then the better the quality of the decision.

From a purely practical standpoint, if we want to change the percentage of our life's events toward more and more successes, the only person whose behavior we can change is our own. A true analysis of what part you played in past events whose outcomes you did not like is essential if you wish not to repeat past mistakes. To have the courage to take a good look in the mirror and let yourself see what is really there with all the chips on the shoulder and monkeys on your back is one of, if not the, major psychological process that you can perform. As Shakespeare said: "To thine ownself be true" one of the essential tools in a toolkit for effectively managing your own life.