

Chapter One:

First story

Are you living life the way you really want to? Is there something you would like to change? Maybe you want to manage your emotions and relationships better, deal with conflict constructively, be more confident, less stressed, get fit, lose weight or achieve something else that is really important to you? Do you have a repeat pattern of New Year resolutions, committing whole heartedly to them year after year until you give up and take them off the list? Or do you just want some insights into what drives your unhelpful behaviours? If you are interested in personal development, and the answer to any of these questions is yes, read on! If you also want to help others achieve their change goals, this book will give you lots of ideas about how you can support them. If you have leadership responsibilities, or provide coaching services, I am confident you will find insights in the following pages which will make you even more effective than you are now.

The power of stories

If you have ever wondered what stops you from making really important changes to lead the life you want, the answer, surprisingly, lies within your own stories.

As humans, we are *story making* beings. We make sense of ourselves, other people and the world we live in through deep-seated stories, in the form of beliefs and assumptions, which either help or hinder us achieve what we want in life. Our stories create the results we are currently getting, the good and the bad. In the words of Terry Pratchett: *'We think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around.'*

Some stories are within our awareness while others are hidden, often created early in life and long since forgotten. Ultimately, everything we do and say in life is determined by our stories. At their creative best, they are wise and helpful. At worst they are misguided and over-protective, causing us to jump at shadows, creating unnecessary fears and anxieties, and holding us back.

Growing up we inherit and adopt our most impactful stories; from our immediate and extended families, from people who care for us, teach us and discipline us; stories from the culture and environment we grow up in, from fairy tales, myths,

movies, books and social media.

These stories create survival responses in our brain and body, moving us towards things that sustain life, or away from or against perceived threats. They are the real drivers of how we show up in the world.

For example, as humans we have a strong need to be perceived positively by important people in our lives to ensure we remain connected to them. To achieve this, early in life, we internalise powerful identity stories. *'You are such a good little boy, so polite and so well behaved; You are a selfish little girl; You are hopeless, just like your father; You are a brave little man; You are pathetic; You are so smart; You are so dumb.'*

While not directly authored by us, these stories subtly infiltrate all areas of our life. For many years I was unconsciously driven by an overpowering need to please story: *'I assume if I don't give people what they want they will always get angry and I won't be safe.'* On the surface, my behaviours were often mistaken by others for empathy, generosity and high levels of emotional intelligence. In truth, they were often dysfunctional, driven by underlying cancerous fears constantly eating away at my self-worth and jeopardising any chance of growing truly strong, resilient relationships. An observer would have seen patterns of conflict avoidance, at home and at work.

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Then, from time to time, the floodgates holding back pent up resentments burst in a controlled, seemingly polite, but nonetheless destructive way.

Another powerful story, '*If I trust others to do it they will inevitably make a mistake and I will be blamed*', drove the need to always be in control to stay safe. The *need to please* story drove conflict avoidance and the tendency to over-commit myself. Combined with an inability to delegate, generated by the *need to control* story, I suffered a crippling repeat pattern of burnout for many years.

For the first forty odd years of my life I struggled with the impact of these hidden stories. Self-help books and personal development workshops proliferated, often generating insight and hope which quickly foundered on the rocks of intended actions. The deep, lasting change I craved for remained will-of-the-wispishly elusive.

The key to change that sticks

From my mid-forties, things turned around as I progressively discovered, applied, synthesised and built on the work of key mentors. Sometimes in person, sometimes through their writing, these mentors helped me develop a practical *Choose Your Stories process* to surface and rewrite my most

unhelpful stories. As a professional coach, I have used this process to help more than one thousand leaders make changes they could not previously make. Inspired by the impact in their lives, I have written this book to make the process available to anyone wanting to overcome the pain experienced when we are ‘stuck’ and unable to make the changes we really want to make.

How this book is structured

The *Choose Your Stories* process is brought to life through the stories of four characters; Lili, George, Jan and Stefan. While based on real people I have coached or worked with in leadership development programs, the characters are fictional. Their challenges, however, are real, and it is likely you will find some of your stories in their stories. You will meet these characters in Chapter Two.

Using *our story library* as a metaphor in Chapter Three, I explore different types of stories we inherit, adopt, create, and sometimes disown. These include *Purpose*, *Identity* and *Values* stories which drive our lives. Separate chapters filled with rich examples of these stories are followed by coaching sessions with our characters, illustrating how they can be surfaced and rewritten in our metaphoric *writing laboratory*.

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In Chapter Seventeen, *How to change your life*, I set out in detail the *Choose Your Stories process*. Chapter Eighteen, *Resources*, provides more information about the models and research which inform much of my work. Details of *Choose Your Stories* development programs you can access through our website are provided at the end of the book.

There are two ways you can approach the change process outlined in this book. You might choose to read from the front, allowing the process itself to emerge from the stories and coaching sessions with our four characters, then check the detailed process in Chapter Seventeen to see how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Alternately you can read Chapter Seventeen first, then go back to the beginning and track the change process as it is applied throughout the book.

Whichever approach you choose, I wish you every success on your journey.

Chapter Two: Our characters

Lili

Lili freezes. Her mind goes blank, heart thumping in her chest. Normally smooth, her olive skin crinkles slightly as muscle tension spreads. Fists clenching the lectern, she is pinned to the stage by harsh spotlights, like a helpless insect. The black microphone attached to the lectern grows in size, threatening her with instant humiliation and a fatal set-back to career prospects.

Then her inner critics start up. *'You're bound to make a fool of yourself'* predicts one. *'You were crazy to agree to present at this leadership conference in the first place'* chimed in the shrill voice of another. *'You should have stuck to being a lawyer, it would have been much safer'*. This from a third.

As the chorus grows, Lili's confidence plummets. Acutely aware of rows of expectant faces, the knot in her stomach expands and small beads of sweat join

forces on her forehead, forming a salty, eye watering, stream. Back-lit, her straight charcoal-black hair frames dark brown eyes, normally shining and smiling, now displaying pupil dilated fear. Somehow she struggles through the remainder of her *Leading Complexity* presentation.

With the ordeal over, staring into her gin and tonic, Lili feels disappointed and frustrated. She read somewhere that fear of public speaking is second only to death by fire for most people and wonders how on earth she is going to overcome this paralysing problem.

Born in Singapore with a Chinese mother and Hungarian father, Lili has just been promoted to head up organisational development in the Australian office of an international consulting firm. In this high profile position her world has suddenly become a whole lot more complex, and presenting at international conferences comes with the territory.

Later that evening, after catching up on the events of her teenage daughter Jasmine's day, followed by a quick phone call to son Daniel, she shares her concerns with her partner David.

'I don't know if I am up to this new leadership role. Just the thought of public speaking paralyses me. If I can't overcome this irrational fear, my career will hit a dead end. Now that Daniel has flown the

nest to University and I have more time on my hands, I think I might get some professional help.’

George

George fumes, inwardly. His face flushes, darkening his naturally fair skin, hazel eyes narrowing beneath curly brown hair. A prickly sensation creeps through his chest. As team leader in charge of South American sales for Medequip, a medical equipment manufacturer, George is often navigating challenging ethical waters. None more so than now.

‘It’s all very well for you,’ he thinks, ‘no matter which way you dress it up, we are effectively paying a bribe and it’s not your neck that’s on the line.’

Jim, George’s manager, senses his anger. He leans back in his chair and shrugs.

‘I’m sure you will manage’, he continues, avoiding eye contact; ‘best just get on with it.’ This accompanied by a dismissive wave of his left hand.

‘Easy for you to say, you selfish bastard!’ explodes George, his stocky frame angling forward in his chair.

Realising he has crossed the line, and fearful of what he will say or do next, George takes a deep breath and storms out, mouth contorted in a crooked grimace. Having followed him home, George’s anger

re-ignites as his three year old son, Ben, throws a huge tantrum when denied ice-cream in the middle of dinner.

Hours later, on his third beer, George is in full swing in a one-sided conversation. His best friend Phil finally interrupts him.

‘George, I don’t think I can take much more of this. Your blood pressure is sky high. You’ve stopped going to the gym and your anger is out of control. You really need to make some changes.’

Coming from someone he respects, this stops George in his tracks. Images of his wife Jill comforting their son Ben nudge reluctant thoughts.

‘Why do I keep shooting myself in the foot like this? Maybe I do need some help ...’

Stefan

Stefan lies silently beside Carmel, his blond hair and piercing blue eyes barely visible in the soft glow of an approaching dawn. He is acutely aware of Carmel’s body, her rhythmic breath moving the bedspread in waves of fabric. Physically separated by a few centimetres, they may as well be continents apart; warm bodies separated by a cold sea of disconnection, the all too familiar pattern playing out in deafening silence. Conversations about perceived

wrongs and hurts that never see the light of day, echoing back and forth in Stefan's head. Desperately wanting connection, and powerless to reach out for it, paralysed by some unknowable fear, his tall, thin-framed body tosses to and fro, eventually succumbing to restless sleep.

Aged sixty-two, born in Australia to Swedish parents, divorced and estranged from three children from his first marriage, and struggling to make his relationship with Carmel work, Stefan takes stock of the conflict avoidance pattern playing havoc in his life as his sleep deprived body is whisked into the middle of the city on the limited stops train.

Arriving at his tastefully furnished office in the large Government agency where he heads up the Policy Implementation Division, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee promises a fresh start to the day. Barely three invigorating sips in, however, pleasure gives way to concern when a calendar alert signals a 15 minute count-down to his performance review meeting with Helen, the Department's Chief Operating Officer, conveniently forgotten and for which Stefan is ill-prepared.

Midway through the meeting Helen's voice takes on a serious tone.

'I am concerned about how you are perceived by your peers. The feedback I receive from them

suggests you are avoiding performance issues with a number of your direct reports. They also find you distant and somewhat arrogant at times. Given the interdependencies across the Divisions, this is quite problematic from my perspective, and needs to be addressed. I think you should consider some executive coaching.’

Jan

Jan leaves the meeting tense and rattled, sensing she has blown the opportunity to open up the first branch of FutureHorizons in South East Asia. Fully aware that nothing will happen without trust, her commitment to listen deeply and move slowly deserted her in the middle of the meeting. Jan’s old pattern of impatience turned up, uninvited; loud, forceful gestures, amplified by her physical size, combine to undermine all that had gone before.

On the flight home, Jan settles in to her uncomfortably tight seat, the appearance of physical awkwardness offset by tightly cropped burnished copper hair and green eyes. She reflects on the two biggest challenges she faces in life; her weight and her impulsiveness, the latter limiting her effectiveness as one of the foundation owners and Chief Executive Officer of a fast-growing start-up

company. Forty-six years old, Jan migrated to Australia with her English father and Scottish mother when she was seven. Her parents support and encouragement, dosed with quantities of hard work, a measure of entrepreneurial flare, and a never-say-die attitude have brought her to the brink of financial success and security.

With considerable trepidation Jan imagines what her life and business partner Sharon will think when she hears about the meeting. Last time something like this happened Sharon made it clear that a repeat performance would jeopardise their relationship.

'Truth be known, the way I manage conflict is creating havoc everywhere, in my personal life and for our business. I wonder where I can get help for this?' Jan ponders.

Chapter Three: Our story library

'A library is the delivery room for the birth of ideas, a place where history comes to life.'

– Norman Cousins

Library layout

Imagine our brain holds a multi-level library containing shelves packed with rich stories. Those we are aware of can be found on the ground level, while in the deepest, oldest basement level of the library, stories hidden from our conscious awareness jostle nervously for space. Tucked away in a dark recess at the very back of this level we find the disowned stories section. Here empty shelves hold place-markers for shadowy stories about our capacity to do terrible things. Too painful to acknowledge they belong to us, these stories are consigned on loan to the story libraries of other people. When, through

their actions, they hold up a mirror which reflect these stories back to us, we over-react, denouncing and demonising them. In Chapter Sixteen we take a deep dive into this section, taking heed of Joseph Campbell's words: *'The cave you fear to enter contains the treasure you seek.'*

Moving up through the library we come to the self-authored level.¹ This light and airy space houses chosen stories which support us to be who we want to be and achieve what we want in life.

Spread across all levels of our library are *Purpose*, *Identity* and *Values* stories which inform how we live our lives.

'Why do I exist, and what am I to do about it?' These big, daunting questions are the birthplace of our *Purpose* stories. Some people have a clear sense of their life purpose from a very early age. For others, their purpose will change and evolve during their life journey. Either way, when written and lived in full these stories give rise to great satisfaction and joy. Left incomplete, unexpressed, gathering archival dust, or even worse when the stories driving us move us away from our true purpose, unnecessary pain and suffering follow as surely as night follows day. In the words of Victor Frankl: *'Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.'*²

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'Who am I? How do I want to express who I am? Am I more than the many different roles I adopt; husband, father, uncle, grandfather, friend, consultant, coach, fly-fisher, learner, story teller ...?' Sometimes confronting, these questions go to the heart of our *Identity* stories.

Then there are our *Values* stories about what is most important to us, consciously and unconsciously driving our actions and our judgments of others.

Writing laboratory

Alongside our story library, imagine we have a well-equipped writing studio, a reflective, creative space. Here we can explore the stories holding us back from different perspectives,³ rewrite unhelpful stories and set up experiments to test their change effectiveness before moving them to the self-authored level of our library.

As you read on you will notice that many unhelpful stories include specific words or phrases that give them potency.⁴

The first group of words, technically known as 'modal operators of necessity', includes words like *can't*, *have to*, *must*, and *should*. These are problematic because they take away or reduce choice, threatening our autonomy, activating threat responses

in our brain. *Can't* also operates as a pessimistic soothsayer, predicting our inability to change with great confidence. '*I can't be creative*' will always be true.

Some years ago I gained valuable *should* insights in a counselling session with Tim Ambrose, a gifted therapist, as I relayed a painful adolescent experience to him. My story starts on a train bound for boarding school after summer holidays ...

I choose the front corner seat, far away from the 'in' crowd. Shy and overly-sensitive, scrunched down, I take refuge behind my book.

'*Sautelle, come here.*' Jock's words bounce from seat to seat, gathering interest and intensity, landing loudly beside me, commanding attention. A disturbing image flashes into my mind. Jock in the quadrangle outside the boarding house dormitory. Bill struggling to get free. Jock smashing Bill's head onto the concrete. I shudder, frozen, powerless.

'*I said come here, now, and I mean it.*' This time in a more menacing tone.

Fearful feet choose betrayal, marching me, eyes averted, the length of the carriage. Three aristocratic country girls, confident of their place in the world, wait expectantly beside Jock. By no means the sharpest tool in the academic shed, his rugged good looks and sporting prowess are magnetic.

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Struggling at first to hide behind each other, jostling to complete the sentence no matter how grammatically correct, these nervous words eventually tumble out: *'Hi Jock, what do you want?'*

He sneers, *'Nothing, you pathetic nerd. Go back to your book you loser.'*

Time freezes. Hushed conversations abruptly end. High pitched giggles combine with Jock's derisive laughter, driving me through a gauntlet of stares to my seat. Humiliated, shaking, choking back tears, confidence shattered, I sit in agonising isolation as the train takes an eternity to reach its destination.

Sitting in Tim's consulting room more than 30 years later, shoulders slumped, feeling sick in the stomach, I finish describing what happened. Tim listens patiently. A wave of anger suddenly floods through me, straightening my body.

'I am really angry with myself. I should have stood up for myself. Anything would have been better than what I did. I am so ashamed of myself, I should have ...'

Tim cuts me off before I can finish the sentence. *'John, listen very carefully to me. If you could have, you would have, so stop **should-ing** all over yourself!'*

Then there are 'universals', words like *always*, *inevitably*, *never*, *everybody*, and *nobody*, which

unhelpfully exaggerate and over-generalise our experience. Rarely accurate, favourites of our doom and gloom inner critics, these words populate many of the stories intended to protect us from our greatest fears, predicting catastrophic consequences if we ignore them. *'If you speak publicly you will inevitably make mistakes, appear incompetent, be humiliated and shamed and no-one will ever trust you again.'* In their over-zealous desire to protect us, they impose stringent limitations on what we can or can't do.

As part of the change process we will pay close attention to all of these powerful and influential language patterns.