

Being Imperfect Together – 07-02-15

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

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Don't you love a good story? Since the beginning of human history we have told stories of valor, tragedy, humor, and inspiration, among others. Storytelling was the original technology for passing down the history of our people; it's the way we make sense of the world and deepen experience and relationship.

We mostly swim in a sea of stories, both internal and external. We observe or experience a person or event, paying attention to, missing, or outright ignoring parts of the overall event and then making up a story to explain the whole thing to ourselves. It's fascinating, for example, how eyewitnesses to an event can give vastly different accounts of it.

What's at work here is subjectivity, our knack for evaluating the world and other people according to how they make us feel. At its most basic, we either feel good or bad. From there, we all create stories about the person's motivations and reasons for doing what they do, especially when we have a difficult or "bad" interaction.

The reality is we can never really know what another person's true intentions are, but we spin a yarn to make sense of the situation. We end up on thin ice when we react to them based on what we imagine are the reasons for whatever it is they're doing to us or to others. Then, because of our own assumptions about them, they seem to react to us in the same way, confirming our opinion of them because of our own story about them. Confusing, huh? That's why it's so hard for us to step outside our own stories.

The biggest trap within our subjective-storytelling is our habit of personalizing too often. We think the behavior is about us, when most of the time it's much more about the other. For example, even if that lady's quietness was about something you said, it may have much more to do with her own uncertainty about her ability to respond rather than your being rude or insulting.

The healthy way out of this thicket is to make sure you pay attention to what psychologists and counselors call the "functional facts" of the situation. Doing this helps you steer clear of speculating about things you can't see or understand, such as the other person's motives. We are on stronger ground when we answer questions about the who, what, where, when, and how of behaviors and stay out of the why.

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