



A
NEW
TERRITORY
OF
MATURITY

Updating Our Stories To
Enhance Our Lives

Rosamund Stone Zander

Step out of that old story you call reality, and create a new and more vibrant one. Then, enroll others into creating a world all of you want. To start, be where we are, not where you were.

In those endless years it took you to grow out of childhood and stand on your own two feet, you learned about the world in doses. Some of what you learned (and thought you understood) has evolved over time with added experience, but some of the discoveries you made and the stories you constructed around them as a child, even as young as three, have stayed the same, child-like and unchanged, no matter how many years have passed.

If your father, or even a classmate, called you stupid, there is a chance that you are walking around even now with a definition of yourself as “not as smart as other people”—even if you have mastered everything you’ve needed to learn. Or perhaps you were told in church or at home that your thoughts were bad, and every time you have those thoughts now, you feel guilty.

“Some of the stories your young self came up with to explain your world have remained child-like, unchanged, no matter how many years have passed.”

If your parents lived through a war, or were particularly anxious about your survival, you may well hold the view that life is inherently dangerous—which of course it is, especially for a young child, but life is not dangerous in the same way for most of us now. Some of our parents worried and warned us, and some of us then concluded that danger is a permanent feature of the world and grew up cautious and anxious, long after the risks of crossing the street or being kidnapped had passed.

That's living life in the past, seeing the world around you through a child's eyes in a child's story. You've been walking around in kid's sneakers and they're much too small for you. Here's how to fit yourself out with good pair of hiking boots to go the distance...

1. Recognize that we live in stories—not reality.

Steven Pinker, cognitive scientist, says, “There is no reason to believe that what we see bears any resemblance *whatsoever* to what's out there.” (Italics, mine.) Them's strong words, but not too strong for my point. Accept lock stock and barrel that we live in narratives with no access to “the truth.” We learn to navigate our world, the physical world as well as the social one, through the “accumulated wisdom” of our culture, friendship groups, and families, as well as our own unique experiences. Examples might be “guns keep us safe and free,” “democracy is the best form of government,” “dogs bite,” “don't open your door to strangers,” or “science will solve all our problems.” In cultures that welcome “paranormal” phenomena and have a lively category for them, many people's story of reality includes ghosts and other supernatural presence, and they see such phenomena all around them. That doesn't mean that they're really out there.

2. Understand that we don't decide to act. It is our story about the world that draws us into action.

If you think you can't hit a ball, you won't go play tennis. If it is self-evident to you that marriage is an institution for one man and one woman, you're unlikely to entertain questions regarding any other arrangement. If you love trees, your eyes will be drawn toward all the magnificent ones in the park, but if you think dogs bite, your arms won't open in greeting to that peppy golden retriever barreling toward you on the path.

We don't really decide to act: we are drawn into action by the representation of the world we carry within us and see before us. Ergo, if you want to change the world or something in it, change your story. Of course, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but you can make a silk purse out of pieces of silk that are so crumpled and dirty as to be almost unrecognizable.

Translated to business: You can't get a "lazy" employee to become fast-paced and efficient, unless you can plausibly say he isn't really lazy and has the makings of a good worker, but is hindered in some way—perhaps by fear or confusion as to what he is supposed to do. Change the story and try out the new one. If that story resonates with you, it is likely to spur both of you into action.

You can turn a cynic into a passionate person who doesn't want to be disappointed again by dialoging with her passion until it blossoms. What other story could you devise to fit the circumstances that would get you two into positive communication?

3. Distinguish one kind of story from another.

Let's identify three kinds of stories:

1. **Child Stories:** Stories—views of reality—that were made up by the mind of a child that have remained unchanged.
2. **Adult Stories:** Stories—views of reality—that are open, flexible, and matched to our current world and have evolved as we have matured.
3. **Life In Creation:** Visionary stories that are consciously constructed by the mature mind to enhance life for all.

Child Stories are:

- **I-centered:** I have to look out for Numero Uno. Everything is personal.
- **Dramatic:** It's not FAIR! Or... YAY, I WON!
- **Hierarchical:** Other people judge me, validate me, give me permission, or overlook me.
- **Dependent:** I can't fix this myself. She has to meet me half-way!
- **Fear-based:** My life is at stake.
- **Scarcity-minded:** There won't be enough for me (or mine).
- **Identity-based:** This is just the way I am!
- **Concrete:** I KNOW it's true (because I saw it or heard it).
- **Absolute:** She said "no" so that's it. It's not going to change.
- **Linear-thinking:** That's because...
- **"Reality" is fixed.**

Adult Stories remove you from the center.

- **It's not about me, it's all about being human:** nothing is personal.
- **Connected, collaborative:** I can grant people authority, but as people we're on equal footing.
- **Compassion-based:** We've survived, and now our job is to connect with each other.
- **Responsible:** I can take responsibility for anything I don't like that is happening in my life.
My life is my story!
- **Abundance-minded:** "Reality" is subject to my narrative. Possibility is unlimited.
- **Systemic-thinking:** If I widen the frame, what are the factors that may have been implicated in (say) my losing my job?

“ We don't really decide to act: we are drawn into action by the representation of the world we carry within us and see before us.

Examples of Child Stories:

- “My mother didn’t love us.”
- “He’ll *never* ask me to marry him (drama).”
- “We had a cold winter so that stuff about global warming is obviously not true.”

Examples of Adult Stories:

- “My mother did the best she could. She loved us perhaps as much as she could love anyone.”
- “We got divorced because we saw that marriage wasn’t the best way for us to be together.”
- “There is no bad weather, only inappropriate clothing.”

Now upgrade to adult stature those dramatic child stories that put you at odds with other people in your life.

1. Commit to the notion that you have the power to alter your experience in a way that connects you authentically to all others. This is not about thinking positively, or being polite. You can always create a narrative that draws you toward another person, no matter what he or she has done.

You can even have compassion for the proverbial ax murderer because you tell the story that he has lost all humanity and knows it (even while you insist that he stay in his cell).

2. Find a theme that has often triggered you into an emotional state in your life, such as: losing, rejection, being lied to, betrayed, insulted, flattered, out of control, abandoned, misunderstood, overlooked, marginalized, abused.

Decide that your theme, with all the feelings surrounding it, represents a memory of a time before you were old enough to change things or were capable of tolerating what happened without adding meaning.

3. Now make a new story out of the same information. Begin by expanding the frame. Look to see what else was going on around the memory. Often, when you start to recast the story in an adult form, data supporting the new story will come to mind. Here is an example:

Fred 's father committed suicide when Fred was eleven, leaving him, his younger brother and his mother without support. From that time on the family story was that the father's death had been a selfish act. Fred put a personal twist on the loss; he couldn't understand WHY his father would have abandoned him. Fred is now 36 and not a day has gone by that Fred has not gone over and over the question. His solution has been to try to drop his obsession and get on with things, but it hasn't worked.

So I asked him the kind of questions that you can ask yourself. I enlarged the frame to include other data. "What had been the relationship between your father and mother?" It emerged that they had fought often and in fact had had a serious argument that very evening. His mother had announced she was going to leave. "Does that fact make him less selfish in your mind?" "No," said Fred. "They often fought and my father had said many times that he would kill her, murder her if she tried to leave him. You see how selfish he was?" "But," I said, "he didn't kill her. He killed himself. Was he depressed?" "Yes," said Fred, "he was very depressed over many years." (So Fred's feeling of being abandoned may have started many years before).

I said, “It seems he was very dependent on your mother. Do you think he might have believed that she would leave him this time, and was afraid he would kill her?” “Maybe,” said Fred. “So why do you think he killed himself instead of her?”

Fred was on the verge of tears. Quietly he said, “Because he didn’t trust himself not to kill her and he didn’t want to leave us without a mother.”

The story instantaneously bumped up from child to adult. Instead of Fred being the victim at the center, Fred became a compassionate and wise onlooker to a tragic situation. The selfish identity did not figure anywhere. He told me the next day that the ruminations that had occupied him for twenty-five years had evaporated, and he was now able to focus on good memories of the times he and his father were close.

“Commit to the notion that you have the power to alter your experience in a way that connects you authentically to all others.”

A story is a story—not a truth. Fred’s story served its purpose. This story gave a robust and plausible answer to the question that had been consuming him for decades, and as the story “grew up,” so to speak, so too did Fred.

4. Consolidate your new position by naming every overblown feeling you have as a memory. Feeling blue? A little sadder than the day warrants? Get curious about the sadness as a memory of another time. Then you can be wonderfully sympathetic toward a younger version of yourself, and start to heal any wounds. Irritated that your friend is taking advantage of your good will? Frame that feeling as a memory, and pick up the scene at an age when you may have felt too timid to ask for what you wanted. Then peel the story about how your friend is taking advantage of you off her like old wallpaper, and find her again—your authentic companion who can’t wait to do what would make you happy.

Okay, so you’ve upgraded some stories (always more to go) and are now living in the present. You’ve got your hiking boots on. Where are you headed? I have a few suggestions:

1. Why not initiate new patterns?

Take dance lessons, learn Spanish, learn French, try Japanese, try Arabic! Go on a road trip. Love someone.

2. How about taking up (again) the practice of an art or sport that you gave up some time ago, and play with it seriously?

Now that you live in adult stories, you don't have to worry about how good you are. You have decided that working on anything that enlivens you is a contribution to others. And of course you don't try to measure that gift—it's simply the story you tell.

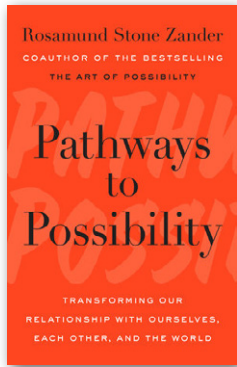
3. Discover what you have always cared about from your earliest days, but may have thought you were too busy (story) or too insignificant (major story) to engage with.

Politics? Oceans? Poverty? New Science Research? City Gardening? Journalism?

Create a story that draws you into contact with the communities engaged with your topic.

Start new conversations and create new stories, and you are on your way to creating new life! 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Rosamund Stone Zander is the author of *The Art of Possibility*. Trained as a Family Systems therapist, she coaches organizations, teams, and groups, and designs programs that strengthen relationships, promote an ethical outlook, and spur effective action. Ms. Zander has conducted workshops in a wide variety of settings ranging from school systems, medical groups, and corporations, to the World Economic Forum. Ms. Zander is also an accomplished painter. She has been a lover of landscapes throughout her life, and has devoted herself to environmental causes.

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