

# Roads to Reconnection

The E-Journal for Bonnie Miller's Inter-Action Consulting  
Writing about the ideas, tools and practices of reconnecting life to living.

In this issue: How to change a Bad Reputation

## That's Not how the Story Goes!

Last issue, I wrote about how stories shape what we believe about ourselves. This issue, let's look at how difficult it is to change a story, and steps we can take to overcome that difficulty.

Imagine this: You are reading the story of "The Three Little Pigs" to your six- year old, and you come to the part where the pigs are holed up in the brick house. You decide to get creative and improvise, to teach your child that change is possible.

You say: "Just as he was about to begin Huffing and Puffing, the Big Bad Wolf suddenly began to feel sorry about chasing the first two pigs and blowing over their houses. He was filled with remorse and decided then and there to give up eating pigs and become a vegetarian. With trembling whiskers, he penned a note apologizing to the pigs, enclosed a cheque to help them rebuild their demolished homes, and went away, reformed, to find a decent whole foods store."

Your six year old is likely to object: "that's Not how the story goes!"

At least, he will if he's heard the story before.

Are your family stories like that? Mine are. I have a revered Uncle, a model of fatherhood and self-sufficiency- there are many stories of his excellence- no one wants to hear talk about the ways in which he has failed the people closest to him. And I have a cousin who can't do anything right, who is doomed to make the

## An Invitation to Practice-

*Dealing with a problem when it is too close to you (or even **inside** you) is like trying to draw a picture of the back of your own ear. Thinking about the problem as something separate allow us to develop a greater sense of the relationship between ourselves and the problem, and to understand with a better perspective how the problem affects our lives.*

*A playful way to do this (and it works well with kids, too) is to imagine the problem as a thing, a creature or companion that hangs around us. I'll give you an example:*

*I recently made a Thing out of Worry, a problem that was driving me a little crazy... I decided that Worry was the size of small dog, with a spongy sort of body and hair like a string mop. This Worry is slow-moving, and smells like a ditch- damp, mildewy, unpleasant. Worry likes to climb into my lap, at times, and can get very heavy- causing me to just sit and breathe in its rather mouldy scent.*

*How can I deal with Worry, once I have this picture of it? Well, after studying when Worry comes around, and what prompts it to sit in my lap, I have recognized that its agenda is to keep me from taking*

**wrong choice, no matter what- her moments of courage and periods of success are never discussed. And if someone tries, they are often met with "yeah, but..." or outright denial.**

**Just like the poor Wolf. Even if he does find a decent whole foods store, chances are that the staff would call the Woodsman, the moment they see his whiskers at the door. And what is left for him to do, but go back to blowing down houses, and eating pigs.**

**It's easy to feel like the wolf in the story of the Three Little Pigs. Our characters get drawn out in simple terms, our habits and actions are sorted and labelled, and through time and repetition these labels become very difficult to change. We are expected to behave in certain ways by those around us- sometimes those expectations are so strong that other actions just seem invisible.**

**Changing story-lines is not as easy as we might hope- which is why we often go back to old ways of thinking and behaving, in spite of our intentions to do otherwise. But there are a couple of things we can do, to make the possibility of change a little easier.**

## **How to change a story-line**

**The first step is to get a better understanding of what you are dealing with.**

**Often our description of a problem is very simple and one dimensional. We assume that a one word label is enough, and that everyone understands what is meant by this label.**

**What is more, we apply that label to the inside of our personality jar, which makes it very difficult to remove or examine in detail.**

**So the first thing is to get the label off and to separate it from ourselves.**

*too many risks, to help me slow down and consider the details. Now I am able to reassure this Worry, squeeze out a little of the ditch water, and help it lighten up by keeping it informed of my slow and steady progress.*

*Do you have a problem you can make into a Thing? Perhaps you know a child who is hounded by a problem? Write about it, draw it, have a conversation with it- and let me know how it goes...*

### **Movie recommendation**

One of my favorite movies of all time is Clint Eastwood's "Unforgiven".

This movie deals a Lot with reputation and the ways that stories influence behaviour. Of course, it's Hollywood, and it's a Clint Eastwood western- but I think the movie does a brilliant job of looking at how stories and expectations restrict what is possible for people to do, and how powerful a problem reputation can be.

The second thing is to really enrich our understanding of what this label describes and what the patterns are of the thing that this label describes.

Let's use our Wolf to illustrate.

**Step 1. Find a name for the problem** - just one specific aspect, one particular label. In the Wolf's case, we have several choices- the problem might be called 'Murderous Intent' 'Hunger for Pigs', or perhaps 'Huffing and Puffing'.

If it were up to me, I'd suggest 'Huffing and Puffing'- after all, he never really gets to Eat the Pigs- it's the blowing down of houses that we hear about. And I am curious to know if he experiences Huffing and Puffing with anything else besides the houses of the three little pigs.

**Step 2. Study the problem in detail.** If the Wolf agrees that Huffing and Puffing is the problem (for now) then let's examine the patterns of Huffing and Puffing. When does the idea to Huff and Puff first pop up? Are there times when the Huffing and Puffing is more likely to happen? What is happening just before it begins, and is anyone else around? What is the usual outcome of the Huffing and Puffing? After the Wolf has given into the suggestion to Huff and Puff, what happens to his reputation, to his relationships with others? How does he feel about himself during the Huffing and Puffing? How does he feel afterwards? Are there things he likes about the Huffing and Puffing? Are there things he doesn't like? What makes him want to stop Huffing and Puffing, anyway?

**Step 3. Look for exceptions to the problem.**

Think about any times when the problem did not have the usual result. In our example, were there any times when the Wolf saw pigs building houses and he did not give in to the urge to Huff and Puff? Perhaps he went out for a run, instead? How did it happen that he was able to resist? What was his thinking? Were there any others who helped him? How did it feel, when he avoided or resisted Huffing and Puffing? What did he like about that? And how might he repeat this action?

**Step 4. Share the exception.**

As we imagined with the staff at the whole foods store- the Wolf cannot expect others to know of his changed intentions automatically. It is important that he share stories about times when he did not Huff and Puff, but was able to go about his business, stick to eating pie instead of pigs, and live and let live. Even though people (and pigs) may not believe it at first, if the Wolf continues on his new course, and continues to share the new story, then Over Time, the story of the Huffing and Puffing will be replaced

with the story of the wonderful Vegetarian Wolf...

## Enough with the Wolf, already

Okay- so I may be a little over-involved with the Big Bad Wolf... but the important thing to consider is that problem story-lines are made powerful through repetition, and through our desire for predictability. Changes to our personal stories are made more possible when we take a curious interest in the habits of the problem and begin to separate ourselves from the problem, document the habits of the problem and share our progress in change.

So, if there is a problem that is interfering with your life at this moment, think about these four steps:

1. Name the problem and set it at a distance from yourself so you can see it.
2. Study the habits, timing, behaviour and results of the problem.
3. Look for times when the problem does not get its way with you.
4. Share the story of those times with yourself and others.

We'll revisit these ideas in further issues- let me know what you think, or if you have questions- I'd love to take them up as we go along.

## Therapy Speak

Sometimes therapists use the term "Internalization" to describe how a person has taken a label and placed it inside themselves, as if it were an unchangeable factor of their personality.

This way of thinking is very common in our language- we say things like "I am depressed" or "I have an anxious personality".

Other internalized ideas are not put into words as often, but are experienced as ways of thinking and living that are actually determined by social ideas and stories about what is or isn't normal, what is or isn't socially acceptable.

Examples might be stereotypes like "pretty girls can't be smart" or "men are not emotional"- there are too many to list.

When these ideas get internalized without question they can have a powerful and sneaky influence on our self-esteem, motivation, and relationships with ourselves and others- limiting our sense of what is possible to do.

Putting problems outside of ourselves- or "externalizing" the problem- is a way of getting some distance from these ideas so that we can take their measure and make some decisions about where we agree and disagree with the idea or problem. Once we do that, we can begin to live out a different relationship with the idea, with the problem, and with ourselves.