

Change Your Story, Change Your Life

By Stephanie Tolan

Dealing with the subject of counseling and guidance for the gifted kids we raise or know or work with can be a little daunting for those of us not trained in the subject. We know that some of the children may need to work with “real” counselors at various points in their lives, but we feel uncertain about what we can do for them when they are in our care and company. What I’m calling the “Story Principle” is a method of personal empowerment that any of us can learn to use for ourselves and also share with children.

As a novelist, *story* is important to me; it is, after all, how I make my living. But do you know how important story is to you, to gifted kids, to all of us?

As we move through our lives, moment by moment, day by day, each of us is telling ourselves a story – about ourselves, about what is happening to us, about what we can or should do about it, and what it all means. Not everyone makes a living creating stories, but in a very real sense we make our lives that way. The biggest difference between the stories I write for my novels and the ones we are all “writing” in our lives is that I always know I am working with fiction, while most people believe their lives to be “Reality.”

Of course my life is reality! you are likely to say. There’s no possibility of changing it the way one might change the characters and plotline of a story. Reality is solid. Reality is – real!

But consider the possibility that everything is story. (Or – if you aren’t ready to go that far – that everything in our subjective experience is story.) The wonderful thing about story, “real” or otherwise, is that because we create it, we can change it – in any given moment. The “Story Principle” unleashes unprecedented power into our lives – our Real Lives!

Let me start with a personal example. At the conference of the National Association for Gifted Children in Louisville last November, I was to give the talk on which this article is based on Saturday morning at 10:45. Here’s the Reality: Friday evening I developed severe head congestion and a cough that kept me up most of the night. I was staying at a hotel several blocks from the convention center and knew that there was a VCS pharmacy between my hotel and center where I was to present. So I planned to leave my hotel early and stop on the way to get some Aleve Cold and Sinus medication which I’d used before to quickly eliminate the congestion so I could speak clearly.

I left that hotel at a time that seemed early enough to do what I needed to do. At CVS I discovered that Aleve Cold and Sinus could not be simply taken off the shelf and purchased. Apparently, I had to take a care to the cash register where the cashier would get the medication. The store was very busy that morning. I took the card and a bag of cough lozenges, got into the shortest line, and waited.

When I finally reached the cash register I was told that I was in the wrong line for making a purchase – this line was for lottery tickets only. So I checked my watch (the extra time I’d allowed was fast disappearing!) and got into the longer line. When the four people in front of me had completed their business, the cashier looked at the card I was holding out to her, and said, “Sorry, you can’t have that. You have to get it from the pharmacy. It isn’t open on Saturdays.”

Now here’s where story comes in. Fifteen or twenty years ago, back when I was a pessimistic depressive, I would have been telling myself this story: “Of course I can’t just buy what I need. Nothing’s ever easy.” I would have said (as I hear people saying at the grocery

store all the time), “I always choose the wrong line!” And finally, I would have moaned to myself that given my luck the fact that I needed those pills was practically a guarantee that I couldn’t get them, and now I was going to be late for my presentation. I would have been stressed and miserable, and I would have attributed my misery to the “reality” of my experience. I would not even have suspected I was telling myself a story about it!

In recent years, however, I have discovered (partly thanks to quantum physics) that reality is not as solid as it appears. So I have changed the story I tell myself about who I am and what is my place in the world. My life, my Real Life, has changed with my story. Now I say, “I have whatever I need whenever I need it, wherever I need it, for as long as I need it.” And it keeps turning out to be true!

Instead of getting more stressed with each setback that morning, I told myself that all was fine and I had all the time I needed. When I left CVS, a full fifteen minutes later than I’d intended, every traffic light, as I came to it, gave a “WALK” signal. I found the room quickly and easily and arrived at 10:43. I spoke the first words into the microphone exactly when the recording was scheduled to begin.

I told my audience this example of changing one’s story and said that since I couldn’t buy the medication I must not need it (because *I have what I need whenever I need it*). My head congestion cleared up as I began to speak and didn’t return until hours later.

How many of you have had something annoying happen to you early in the morning and announced to yourself, “It’s going to be one of those days!” And how many of you have then watched your day become a parade of aggravations?

You don’t have to believe me that changing your story would have changed your day (though I will tell you it’s possible). Next time just try acting “as if” that could be. Catch yourself telling a negative story, change it, and watch what unfolds in your life. At the very least, you’ll feel better about your trying day – at best, what seemed initially to be a problem could turn out to be the necessary lead-up to a cascade of positive experiences.

It takes practice to tune in, to hear what we are telling ourselves, and to begin to think of that as story rather than Reality. But the more we try it, the better we become, first at finding your story, and then at changing it. If you have a little trouble with this, you may be glad to know that most children are able to put this principle to use more quickly and easily than adults.

But what of experiences that are really bad, not just annoyances? Surely, you may say, changing our story cannot be useful then!

On the contrary. It is then that the principle becomes most important and has the most powerful positive effect. Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves as our most difficult experiences unfold – stories about who we are, why these things are happening to us, and what the effects of them will be on the rest of our lives – can make the difference between surviving our difficult times and being destroyed by them.

A Lesson from Frodo

One of my favorite stories is Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings Trilogy. It can help kids think about becoming the hero of their own story even in the most harrowing of times. Here we have Frodo the hobbit (certainly as small and apparently powerless in the Middle Earth as a child confront the reality of the American Education system) who would prefer to stay in his cozy hole, warming his toes by the fire and eating plenty of good food. But when he is given the task of carrying the Ring of Power to the Cracks of Doom, he sets out, in spite of his preferences and his fears and the likely overwhelming odds he is bound to face. Why? Because he’s the hero of the story. And because he believes his task (if not himself) is important and meaningful.

Sometimes Frodo is extraordinarily frightened because of the Nazgul who are after him are formidable and terrifying, as are the orcs and goblins and all the other obstacles between his

cozy home fires and the Cracks of Doom. Sometimes he's hungry and exhausted. He gets hurt along the way. Who could blame him for getting discouraged, even refusing to go on?

Life can feel like Frodo's story sometimes. We and our children are bathed in the fearful "realities" of our culture. What we hear from the media all around us is the message that external forces (and enemies) are always at work to harm us if we are not constantly vigilant against them. Nazgul are always hovering above us.

Gifted children, being perceptive and highly aware, are likely to take in far more to these cultural warnings than others. At the same time, because of their differences, they really do encounter more than their fair share of patches of quicksand and pitfalls – even Nazgul – along their journeys. Their stories, sometimes actually exacerbated by what we adults tell them about the trials of giftedness, can become one of powerlessness and victimhood.

We can help them change that by telling themselves that as the heroes of their story, wherever there is quicksand or pitfall or Nazgul, there is a way to get past it. If a particular child prefers computer games to books, we can point out that no matter what the hero of the game must face, there is always a tool or weapon available somewhere in the world of the game if they can figure out what it is and how to acquire it (and they can because that's the whole point of the game!) in a way that will allow them to go on.

It isn't only the story we tell ourselves in the middle of an experience that counts, of course. There's also the story we tell ourselves afterwards. When something painful has happened, a child who can say "I was a hero in this situation, and because I am a hero, it did not defeat me," will have a far better chance of healing whatever wounds she might have received than a child who says, "This unfair and awful thing happened and no matter what I do things like that will go on happening to me all the rest of my life."

In their most challenged moments, we can say to children that sometimes, when things are really tough in our story, we may have to lie down for a while, wrap ourselves in a blanket, and recover before we go on. Even a hero may say, "I'm going to take a break now till I feel better." Afterwards, heroes get up again.

Fairy Tale Guides

Fairy tales are also handy for helping kids think about the effects of the story. Consider Cinderella who did not have such an important task as destroying the Ring of Power. All she had was her life. If Cinderella had told herself that her stepmother and stepsisters had all the power and she was going to be a scullery maid forever, would she even have wanted to go to that ball? Not a chance! She'd have known no prince would look at a scullery maid. She'd have sat by the kitchen fire moaning that she had nothing, "Just these rags and cinders and no chance ever to change it."

But Cinderella wanted so badly to go to the ball that she conjured for herself a fairy godmother who could work the miracle of the mice and the pumpkin and the gorgeous dress. This is no *dues ex machine* story where a powerless victim is saved by a magical outside force. If Cinderella had considered herself a victim, would a dress, however magical, have given her the nerve to walk into the ball and dance with the prince? (Back in my days of "ball going," no mere gorgeous dress could have kept me from standing alone and forlorn against the wall – as I did – telling myself that nobody wanted to dance with me.) Cinderella not only knew somebody would want to dance with her, she dared to tell herself it could be the prince himself. After all, she was the hero and this was her story!

When she had to flee from the ball, Cinderella didn't say, "See, this kind of thing always happens – just when the prince is getting to like me time runs out, and I have to drag myself home with one glass slipper and one bare foot." No, she told herself that she had just had the most wonderful night of her life, and no body could ever take that away from her. Later, when

the prince comes around with the glass slipper, she demands to be allowed to try it on. Voila! Cinderella, with a little help from the allies she summons, creates her own happy ending.

Remind kids that just as they have their own story, so does everyone else. So if someone says “You’re a scullery maid!” (or a jerk), the kid can say, “That’s your story, not mine!”

You might suggest they write a description of themselves as hero. They can make a list of attributes a hero should have, beginning with “I am ...” or “I have...” “I am brave...” “I am strong...” “I am persistent...” “I have lots of allies...” or “I have everything I need whenever I need it.” With this vision of themselves, they can be prepared to confront their obstacles, their challenges, their Nazgul, and even their wounds.

Meanwhile, remember these ideas yourself. (Remember, it’s harder for us.) If you hear yourself saying “I am ...” followed by a less than heroic attribute like “...sick and tired,” you can change that before you find yourself having to take to your bed.

Press the Staples Button

One way to remind yourself (and any kids in your vicinity) to activate the Story Principle, is to take a trip to a Staples office supply store and spend \$4.99 (the proceeds support the Boys and Girls Clubs of America) on an Easy Button. It looks just like the one in their commercials, but when you press it, a cheerful male voice says “That was easy!” Especially wonderful are the instructions for its use.

1. Identify a difficult situation.
2. Press your easy button.
3. Listen to its reassuring message.
4. Smile and get on with your day.
5. Repeat as necessary.

This has to have been designed by a person who understands the effect of story. Note that you aren’t expected to wait until you’ve solved the difficult situation – you hit that button the moment you’ve identified the difficulty. And you’re not told to get busy then and solve it. The story is that the solution comes (having been easy) as you, smiling, go about your day. Put your easy button where you and your children in your life can reach it readily.

Don’t take my word for all this. Press your easy button (real or imaginary) and try it!

For more on the Story Principle, the CD of the full NAGC presentation (“Change Your Story, Change Your Life,” #1333CG09) is available at www.netsymposium.com.

Stephanie S. Tolan, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Educational Advancement, is a consultant on the needs of highly and profoundly gifted children, co-author of *Guiding the Gifted Child*, and the author of 25 works of fiction for children and young adults, including the Newbery Honor winning novel, *Surviving the Applewhites*. Her novel, *Welcome to the Ark*, has been said to offer readers a clearer view of high gifted children than can be found in most text books. Many of her articles about the gifted are available in full on her website: www.stephanietolan.com.

Reprinted with author’s permission from “California Association for the Gifted, Gifted Education Communicator,” Spring 2006 issue.