



Inspired Life

The simple action you can take right now to change your life. All you need is a pen.

By Emily Esfahani

Smith

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Several years ago, I met a young man named Emeka Nnaka, who had been paralyzed playing football for the semipro team the Oklahoma Thunder. As I talked to Emeka about that experience, I noticed something interesting. The way he told the story of his injury had transformed over time — and this led him out of despair into a more positive, purposeful life.

Emeka is one of the people I interviewed for my book “[The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life that Matters](#).” After reading through thousands of pages of psychology research and speaking to over a hundred people like Emeka about what gives their lives meaning, I found that one of the most important pillars of a meaningful life is *storytelling*.

Immediately after his injury, Emeka told himself a story that essentially went like this: *My life was great playing football. But now, look at me. My life is basically over.* But as the months went by, he started weaving a different story about his life. Reflecting on his life before and after he hurt himself, his new story became: Before the injury, “I partied a lot and didn’t think about others I was living a purposeless life. But my injury made me realize I can be a better man.”

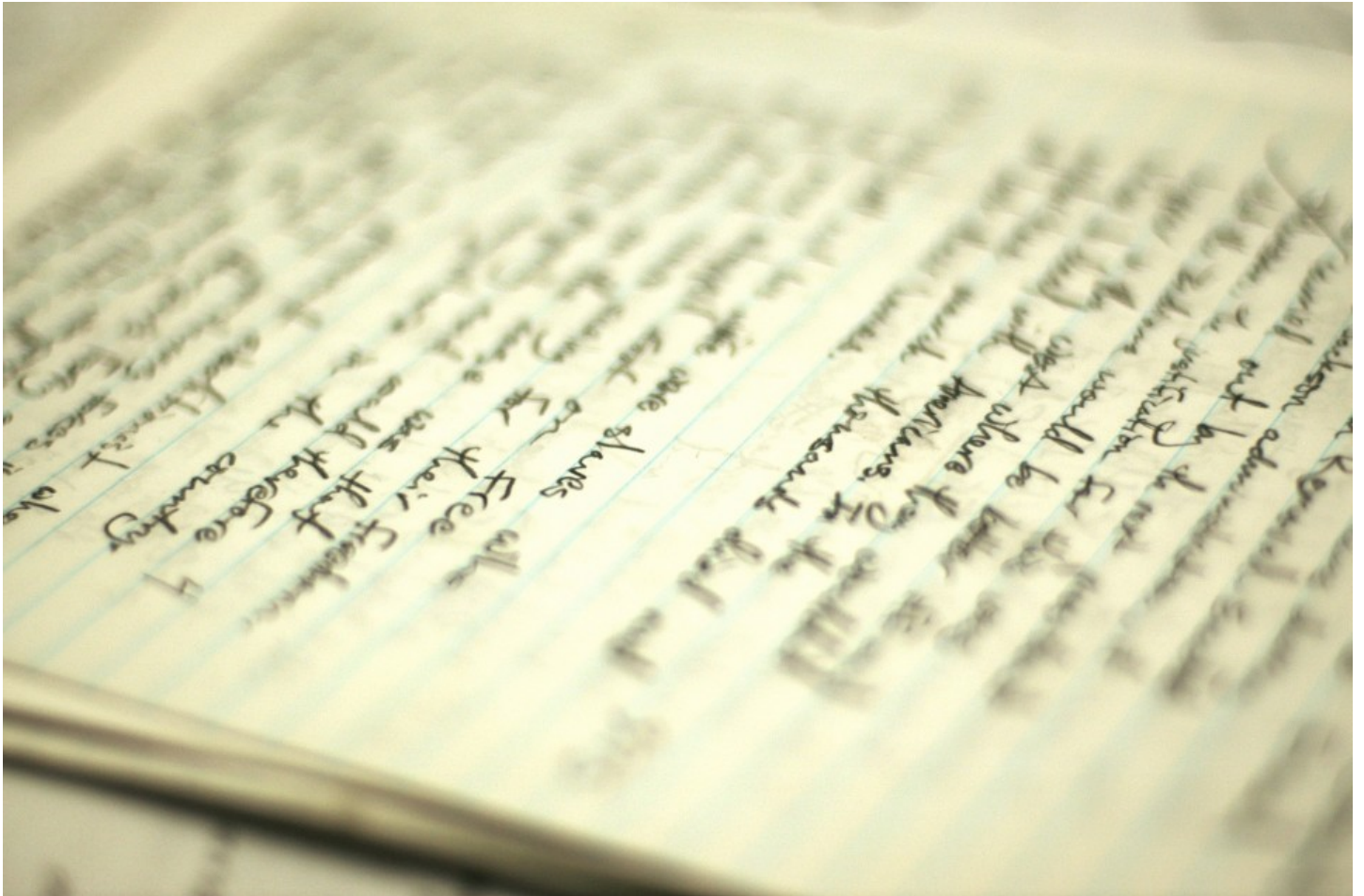
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That transformation in perspective led to a parallel transformation in Emeka’s life. When he reframed his injury as an opportunity for growth rather than as a catastrophe, he discovered that his true purpose lay in serving others. So he started mentoring kids at his church and eventually got a college degree in counseling so he could continue helping people.

We all live in stories — we go to the movies, read novels, and share stories with loved ones and colleagues. But the story I’m specifically referring to here is the story you tell yourself about yourself — about how you became you. Your story is your personal myth. Creating a narrative from the events of your life brings clarity. It helps you understand yourself more deeply — and it can even help you find your

purpose, as it did for Emeka.

But we don't always realize that we're the authors of our own stories and can change the way we're telling them. Many of us think that our lives are just a list of events. But the truth is, we all make what the psychologist Dan McAdams of Northwestern University calls "narrative choices" — and we can all edit, interpret, and retell our stories, even as we're constrained by the facts.



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McAdams has studied people leading meaningful lives, and he's found that they tend to tell particular types of stories — stories defined by redemption, growth, and love. His research focuses especially on redemptive stories, or stories that move from bad to good. The opposite of a redemptive story, McAdams says, is a contamination story, where good things are ruined by bad things.

Think about Emeka. Initially, he was telling a contamination story about his life (My life was great; now it's awful); but, eventually, he started telling a redemptive story (My life was purposeless, but my injury pushed me to be better).

Or think about the story you tell about a more ordinary experience — like how you met your spouse or a good friend. Does it have a positive ending or a negative one? The answer matters.

In her book about marriage “[For Better](#),” the journalist Tara Parker-Pope [explains](#) that she initially told the following story about how she met her husband: “After dinner, he suggested we take a walk around the Capitol building. I had just had surgery on my foot, but I was having such a good time I didn’t care. I didn’t want to ruin the moment so I went along, hobbling around the Capitol grounds.”

[\[Admitting we don’t know everything can transform us— and it can also transform our country\]](#)

But her story began to change over time as their relationship “soured,” she wrote. Here’s the new story: “After dinner, he suggested we take a walk around the Capitol building. I had just had surgery on my foot. Of course he didn’t even notice that I could barely walk.”

It’s the same set of facts, but a radically different interpretation — a radically different story. And this is critical. The stories we tell both reflect the reality that we’re living, and they also shape that reality.

In a [classic psychology study](#) published in 1992, researchers had 52 couples tell the story of how they met. Those stories predicted, with 94 percent accuracy, whether the couples had divorced three years later. The couples who told more positive stories were far more likely to be together in stable marriages three years later than the ones who told more negative stories, who were more likely to be divorced.

The question is why. It may be that couples tell more negative stories because their relationships are inherently flawed, and those flaws are reflected in the story; but it may also be that the story itself became a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you tell a negative story about some aspect of your life, like your relationship, then you’ll likely feel even worse about that relationship and start focusing on other troubled aspects of it, which could lead to more angst.

The story, in other words, sets you on a spiral, and that spiral can take you down — or up. [Research by](#) psychologists Adam Grant of the Wharton School and Jane Dutton of the University of Michigan found that if you tell a story about a time you were helpful to someone, you will actually act more generously later on. That’s because the stories we tell get inside us — they reinforce the good (or bad) aspects of our identity — and we then live by those stories.

[\[There could soon be a drug to prevent depression and PTSD, thanks to this 34-year-old neuroscientist\]](#)

Of course, this raises a question. How can people change their stories, especially if

they're weaving dysfunctional narratives about themselves?

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Some people get help from a therapist. But you can change your story on your own, too, just by reflecting on your life thoughtfully. In studies, James Pennebaker at the University of Texas at Austin invited people into his lab to write about the most upsetting experiences of their lives for fifteen minutes a day for three to four days in a row. The people who wrote about an adversity ended up going to the doctor less often, they got better grades, registered lower blood pressure, and displayed fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to a control group.

The reason was meaning. Pennebaker found that those in the expressive writing condition were actively trying to make sense of what happened to them, and the ones who benefited the most from the exercise were the ones who made the most progress in meaning-making over time. The research subjects forged meaning in one of three ways.

First, they probed into the causes and consequences of the traumatic experience — how the experience shaped them, what they lost and gained. Pennebaker measured this by counting their use of what he calls “insight words,” like “realize” and “understand.” Second, they showed a shift in perspective. Instead of writing about why this happened to *me* they wrote about why *he* abused me or why *she* divorced me. In other words, they put some emotional distance between themselves and the event, and displayed some empathy toward others. Finally, they were able to find some sort of good that resulted from the experience — some positive outcome that redeemed the bad.

But you don't need to experience a terrible adversity to benefit from storytelling. We all suffer and struggle, some of us in big ways and others in smaller ways. No matter who we are or what we've experienced, storytelling can help us manage the vicissitudes of life with more meaning. I spoke to a hospital custodian named Candice Billups, for example, who told me her job is helping sick people heal. Her story wasn't “I clean bedpans for a living; it's awful and stressful work.” No; her story was, “What I do helps people get better.”

Emily Esfahani Smith is the author of [“*The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life that Matters*.”](#) Smith is an instructor in positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as an editor at the Stanford University's Hoover Institution, where she manages the [Ben Franklin Circles](#) project, a collaboration with the 92nd

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