

CHAPTER 2

**YOUR STORY SUCKS...
CHANGE IT**



“We are the stories
we tell ourselves.”

—JOAN DIDION

It was a cliché day for a funeral. Cold. Wet. Gray. My friend's father, Pete, had passed away. Though I've known Jessica since we began day camp together at age seven, I didn't know her father well at all. I knew he was a teacher. I knew he was a skier. And I knew he was a good man with a big heart who loved life.

During the service, people were invited to come to the front of the room and share memories about Pete. One of his closest friends, Marty, rose from his seat, sauntered down to the front, and took his place behind the podium. After a moment, his thick, Brooklyn accent belled through the microphone.

"The thing I'm going to miss most about Pete," he paused, finally looking up, "...is that after a day of skiing, we'd be sitting around with a bunch of friends and someone would share a story. It didn't matter what the story was about or who was telling the story; it never failed... The second that person was done speaking, Pete would lean back, wrap his hand around his chin and, after a moment of contemplation, say, 'Y'know... That story's a six!'"

The anecdote caught me off guard and I let out a guffaw at a volume that didn't quite match the tone of the occasion. Nevertheless, this tale sparked two thoughts: One, I'm sorry I didn't get to know this dry-witted, kindred spirit, and two, I'm stealing this rating technique immediately and using it with my clients. Though I was not privy to the specific criteria Pete utilized to determine his scoring structure, I had some ideas of my own.

The day after the funeral, I was in a heightened state of focus in my coaching sessions. Over and over, I heard my clients say: “I *should* do that” or “I *don’t have enough* time.” Statements like, “I’m so *overwhelmed*” or “This is *hard!*” sounded like fingernails grating on a chalkboard. After hours of listening to “I *can’t*” and “I’m *stressed*” and “I have *no choice*,” I felt my inner operating system glitching out. Finally, as if possessed by the spirit of Pete, I leaned back, wrapped my hand around my chin, and, after a moment of contemplation, said to one unsuspecting client, “Y’know... That story’s a one! That story sucks!” (Pete was far more generous and gentler than me). Thankfully, my client chuckled at my assessment because they knew my humor was always steeped in love *and* because we both understood I’d hit a “truth nerve.”

The stories we tell ourselves dictate the experiences we have. The problem is that too often, these myths we’re mindlessly conveying literally suck our energy, time, joy, worthiness, and creativity from us. When this is the central tenor of the characters, plot, and arc of that discourse we’re concocting, it weighs us down and cheats us out of our greater value and bigger vision. It keeps us on the hamster wheel of “less than,” “not enough,” or “Who am I to...?,” which is exhausting and debilitating. All of this signals that we’re knee deep in what I call the “Level One” story, per my unauthorized homage to Pete’s grading methodology. I kept my scale simple, ranging from:

LEVEL TEN = This story feels energizing! It’s positive. It inspires you. It lights and lifts you up.



LEVEL ONE = This story really sucks! It’s negative. It exhausts you. It holds you back and weighs you down.

My client, Grace, came to me stuck in her Level One story when she was transitioning out of the grind of the corporate world to focus on her two young children and her home life. She chose to leave her high-powered and influential position as a successful executive in the financial services space where she earned a substantial income. In making this bold shift, she wrestled with her identity as a stay-at-home mom and what success now looked like. I listened to her as she let self-judgment rob her gratitude and happiness for this choice she made.

Though she had just crafted an extraordinary opportunity to take time to be with her husband and kids and reflect on her next steps, including potentially starting her own business, Grace was questioning her decision to leave this job where she got to show up as the “ambitious achiever” and contribute financially to her family. Her aspiration had always been her driver.

Without the security of her salary, title, benefits, and specific benchmarks leading to measurable results, a sense of shame and failure began to creep into her psyche. It was evident and understandable that she was spinning in her Oscar award-worthy, Level One story, starring those all too familiar cast members and skilled “suck-ers”—guilt and fear.

To help halt this script from fully seizing her joy, I asked Grace to share a sampling of her internal dialogue. Here’s some of what she said:

GRACE’S LEVEL ONE STORY

“I can’t/don’t because...”

1. “It’s unsustainable and irresponsible to not work, not have a career, not have income forever.”
2. “I feel guilty that I don’t have to show up at a job and my husband does.”
3. “How dare I say no to income opportunities!”
4. “I’m debilitated by my blank slate.”
5. “I believe I’m capable of doing big things and impacting people, but I can’t see that fitting into the current construct of my life.”

We can't change anything until we name it. Acknowledging these stories in all the forms they take—from excuses to challenges—is key to identifying what invigorates us. Taking stock of what's been keeping you stagnant and isolated from what you aspire to achieve provides the clarity necessary to transform your discouraging, Level One stories into your inspiring, Level Ten declarations.

WHAT'S YOUR LEVEL ONE STORY?

- What's your biggest challenge at this moment? What's keeping you up at night?
- What's your internal and external dialogue that's on repeat?
- What are those unfavorable comments or judgments you make about yourself or others without even thinking?

We all have a repertoire of Level One monologues circling on loop in our head. Many of the ones that we're telling ourselves could be interpreted as affirmations, though not the kind the Dalai Lama would approve of. We're *always* affirming something with our language. I want to help you become aware of what that is and what it's generating in your life. Let's check...

HOW OFTEN DO YOU EXPRESS THE FOLLOWING:

- ✓ "I *should* do this!"
- ✓ "I *shouldn't* do that!"
- ✓ "I *don't have enough* time!"
- ✓ "I'm so *overwhelmed*!"
- ✓ "This is *hard*!"
- ✓ "I'm *stressed*!"
- ✓ "I have *no choice*!"

If you're curious about your greatest hits, keep track throughout the day. Whenever you catch yourself stating these toxic testimonials, whether out loud or quietly to yourself, write them down. As our words and thoughts supercharge and inform our actions, it's a good exercise to help you see how your "affirmations" are affecting your encounters with people, work, and tasks.

The story doesn't have to be long to set a tone and activate your experience. For instance, I had the privilege of working with my client Lila, a business development leader at her firm (and long-distance runner) and her entire team to help them shift their mindset around a key priority set by the CEO at the company. Though the stakeholders were on board with this initiative, it was evident that many folks were spinning epic, Level One stories around their ability to implement it in the way and to the degree that was expected. I was acutely plugged in to the many times Lila said, "This is hard" as she talked about working through the assignment. When I called her out on it, she was confused.

"When I say, 'This is hard' that doesn't mean it's a bad thing," she insisted.

"What does it mean?" I inquired.

"It means there's a challenge and it takes effort, which to me is fulfilling."

"And how fulfilled are you in relation to this specific initiative?"

"Not very," she admitted with a smirk.

"So could your narrative, 'This is hard' in some way be contributing to keeping you from meeting your milestones?"

"Perhaps."

"Would you be open to moving this Level One story up a notch or two and consider letting ease lead the way?"

She gave me the side eye on that suggestion. I took that as a "maybe."

As an athlete, Lila was motivated by things being "hard." She liked the challenge of pushing herself to her limit and then beyond to meet the goal at hand. When I suggested changing the story to one that involved

ease, that felt wrong to her. The sense being that if it's not "hard," it's not worth it. Does this ring true for you?

The adage "Work hard, play hard" is a badge of honor in many circles. And while there's certainly a place for using a challenge to inspire, if you're not enjoying the process or getting the results you're seeking, that suggests there's a space for reflection about what story may be impeding your happiness and success.

This is not to say that challenges are not real. Certain things, objectively, are hard. Climbing Mount Everest. Finding a cure for cancer. Math (Anyone?). Perhaps the mission presented to Lila and her team was "hard" given external factors that were out of her control. There's the statement of fact that something may be "hard" and then there's how we hold it. While both can exist at the same time, it's important to distinguish the difference between the two.

When I dug deeper with Lila, she admitted that while the test to beat her own time with each long-distance run excited her, she was frustrated with her lack of forward movement in meeting the current goals at work. Getting honest with herself about this distinction helped her see how this Level One story was hampering her progress.

Language doesn't just reflect what we're feeling, it shapes us neurologically. In their book, *Words Can Change Your Brain*, Andrew Newberg, M.D., a neuroscientist at Thomas Jefferson University and Mark Robert Waldman, a communications expert, state, "A *single word* has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress."

Positive words like "joy" and "serenity" strengthen areas in the frontal lobes, advancing cognitive function. Motivational centers in the brain are then activated and resiliency is strengthened, according to the authors.

On the flip side, negative language wreaks havoc on the production of neurochemicals that are our stress protectors. Since human brains are hardwired to worry as a way to protect us from anything that threatens

our very survival, it's natural for us to go there right off the bat. But one negative word alone can increase activity in our fear center—our amygdala—and that little dose of adverse language releases dozens of stress-producing hormones, which interrupts our brain's functioning. Newberg and Waldman write, "Angry words send alarm messages through the brain, and they partially shut down the logic-and-reasoning centers located in the frontal lobes."

As stated by the authors, using the right words can transform our reality:

"By holding a positive and optimistic [word] in your mind, you stimulate frontal lobe activity. This area includes specific language centers that connect directly to the motor cortex responsible for moving you into action. And as our research has shown, the longer you concentrate on positive words, the more you begin to affect other areas of the brain. Over time, the structure of your thalamus will also change in response to your conscious words, thoughts, and feelings, and we believe that the thalamic changes affect the way in which you perceive reality."³

In a split second, we can transform those default, negative, Level One stories into electrifying, positive Level Ten invitations that have the power to change our direction and our brains for the better. But how do we do that, especially when we're designed to be in fight-or-flight mode the minute we sense stress or fear? We begin by owning that we are the authority—which encompasses the word "author"—of our lives. We always have the proverbial pen in our hands. We can choose to twist a plot, alter an unwanted pattern, or compose a fresh tale altogether.

³ Andrew Newberg M.D., and Robert Waldman, *Words Can Change Your Brain: 12 Conversation Strategies to Build Trust, Resolve Conflict, and Increase Intimacy* (New York: Avery, 2013).

Upleveling your stories will, in turn, uplevel your life. The choice to do so is yours.

Upon recognizing how much her thoughts were hindering her life, Grace had an epiphany: She had not *accepted* herself in this new role. The Level One story she'd been authoring was so steeped in self-condemnation and second-guessing herself that she was *resisting* the very thing she'd chosen.

As a people pleaser who often overcommitted and then harbored resentment, it was now apparent that Grace stood at a fork in the road. Rather than continue to perpetuate this saga of despair, she decided to appreciate her present state and rewrite her old spiel. She turned her “shoulds” into “wants” and her “have-tos” into “get-tos” and scripted her Level Ten manifesto so she could enjoy the choice she made, and thrive in raising her two beautiful, healthy children. Here's a snippet:

GRACE'S LEVEL TEN STORY

“I CHOOSE to...”

1. “I CHOOSE to trust and appreciate my decisions.”
2. “I CHOOSE to redefine what success looks like over the next few months.”
3. “I CHOOSE to value my time and design my day.”
4. “I CHOOSE to be grateful for all that I have and all that I have yet to discover.”
5. “I CHOOSE to accept myself in this new role and be patient with the process!”

Revising her old, energy-sucking narrative led Grace to turn a corner. With renewed vitality, she adjusted her attention to her kids and her spouse. She took the time she needed to gain clarity about how she wanted to contribute beyond motherhood. And she started her business, which continues to grow at just the right pace for her new, chosen lifestyle.

As for Lila, she eventually acknowledged that her “This is hard” story around the initiative did not produce the kind of motivation or success she was hoping for. Though this tactic worked when she was doing something difficult in her personal life that she *consciously chose*, it proved ineffectual when circumstances or pressure from external forces were at play. In this case, she was dealing with many factors over which she felt she had no jurisdiction. When I asked her to write down the core of her Level One story, here’s what she said:

LILA’S LEVEL ONE STORY “I can’t/don’t because...”	
1. “I’m struggling to get the right meetings set with the right people.” 2. “The assignment is too rigid and I’m stuck.” 3. “It’s taking too long for me to get any momentum.”	

Using this candid feedback, Lila declared her new, Level Ten story:

LILA'S LEVEL ONE STORY "I can't/don't because..."	LILA'S LEVEL TEN STORY "I CHOOSE to..."
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I'm struggling to get the right meetings set with the right people." 2. "The assignment is too rigid and I'm stuck." 3. "It's taking too long for me to get any momentum." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I CHOOSE to set up the right meetings with the right people with ease!" 2. "I CHOOSE to be open to the assignment, flexible in my approach, and enjoy the process!" 3. "I CHOOSE to trust I am right on schedule!"

Can you feel your frontal lobe transforming with all this positivity?

Whatever the challenge is that you're going through, you always have the option to reframe it into a choice. Here are some examples of newly minted Level Ten stories based on our list of common, Level One stories:

LEVEL ONE STORY "I can't/don't because..."	LEVEL TEN STORY "I CHOOSE to..."
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I don't have enough time." 2. "I'm overwhelmed." 3. "I don't have a choice." 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I CHOOSE to empower myself to align with my boss/partner on priorities so that I can set myself up for success." 2. "I CHOOSE to be present and take one step at a time." 3. "I CHOOSE to remind myself that I <i>always</i> have a choice and give myself permission to make one."

In life and leadership, there are going to be situations that are “hard,” yet we still get to *choose* what story we tell about them. Level One stories don’t just disappear. They’ve been around for a while, and they may be stubborn. It’s okay. Write out and read your Level Ten story often to get it in your DNA. Remember... ***you are the author***. You can use this exercise to help make your choices more conscious and your challenges less potent. The power is in your hands.

What will you choose?