On My Mind: The power of the stories we tell ourselves

Part-time Vineyarder and Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter has written an inspirational new book, "Think Outside the Building: How Advanced Leaders Can Change the World One Smart Innovation at a Time." In it, Kanter describes how people with great ideas sometimes fail to launch their innovations because they don't tell a compelling story; they believe that the logic of great ideas is enough to launch them, but they forget the critical importance of buy-in. Professor Kanter writes, "If you don't like how things are going and want to lead change, tell a different story … How problems and potential solutions are framed begins to determine the fate of the idea … Change is never a certainty: it is only a possibility … The stories we tell ourselves are often the limiting factor." Stories, she reminds us, are more memorable than numbers. They "connect the past and present to the future, raising aspirations and making change seem necessary and plausible."

As I read this, it occurred to me that the same things can be said about the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. In a January column, I described my father's demise while in the grip of alcohol and opioids (see bit.ly/2yDH31j). Writing the article had an unexpected and deeply meaningful result for me: it changed the story I tell myself about my father and allowed the love that we felt for each other to rebloom in my psyche. For years prior to writing that essay I mostly thought of my father as a creature of a diseased mind. As I told his story and examined a father-and-son photograph, I felt an outpouring of love for him and remembered how much he loved me. As is the nature of love, it was uplifting and filled me with awe. Too often we tell ourselves stories of despair and forget to remember love. As Kanter points out, changing the stories we tell ourselves can help us "undo the myths of the past . . . in essence rewriting history."

Our stories create our mindsets, behaviors, and even our biology. In fact, the essence of psychotherapy is examining, parsing, and sometimes modifying our stories in order to change the way we feel. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS), psychedelic assisted psychotherapy and hypnosis, and indeed most other types of therapy, work in large part by helping us change the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

I am reminded of a man in his 80s who was consumed with the belief that his life had been ruined by marrying the wrong woman. As he told and retold the stories of his life in a psychoanalytic psychotherapy, his perspective changed. He remembered why he fell in love with his wife, remembered the wonderful children that they had together, and came to see his obsessive ruminations about his wife (and about many other things) as a problem that started in a childhood filled with uncertainty and neglect. As the life story he told himself changed, his heart opened toward himself and his wife.

Cognitive behavioral therapists who study and treat acute stress tell us that with each telling and retelling of a story of trauma, the fear aroused by that trauma diminishes, and the teller experiences an increased sense of control and mastery over both the original trauma and contemporary situations that evoke the same kinds of fears. (For people who suffer from recurrent nightmares, writing down the story of the bad dream night after night is an effective way to make the nightmares cease. (See bit.ly/2X9PcEP.)

A woman I know who grew up with a shaming, controlling father was consumed with pleasing people and avoiding conflict at all cost. She idealized her father and

wanted nothing more than to make him proud. As she told and retold her story, she came to see her father as the damaged, anxious, suffering man that in fact he was. She became less afraid of displeasing him, developed compassion for his pain, and set better boundaries with the people in her life (including her father) who took advantage of her desire to please. She became liberated as she told herself the new story that she had been a container for her father's pain from his own toxic childhood. She moved on with her life and married a man who adored her.

"Think Outside the Building" reminds us that to make systemic change, we need to get the members of a community on board and behind the narrative. The same holds true for a person's internal world. As I described in my article, "Is there more than one of you?" (see bit.ly/2XAWaDj), there is a school of therapy called Internal Family Systems (IFS) that posits that we are not unitary beings, but instead are comprised of a number of sub personalities, or parts, who carry different perspectives. IFS posits that every part has its own story. For instance, an addict may have one sub personality that tells them they should stop using the substance to which they're addicted. That part's voice might say, "I want to be healthy, and find comfort in the closeness of family and 12 step meetings. Remember in childhood before the addiction started how life felt happy?" Another internal voice might respond, "Happy? Mom was a drunken monster and Dad was never there. People are unreliable. Using substances always works to turn off the pain." In IFS therapy, exploring the stories of these two parts and others, and appreciating the perspective of each, can help them all relax and come to a common understanding and agreement to try a new path.

An emerging psychotherapeutic tool — the use of medical doses of psychedelic drugs — can also help people change the stories they tell themselves. As we age and it becomes harder for us to learn new information, the stories that define us tend to become more and more set in stone. It has been hypothesized that the reason that psychedelic medications such as ketamine and psilocybin can quickly shift the stories that people embrace is that these substances allow parts of the brain to communicate in ways that they normally don't in adulthood. They enable people to tell themselves new stories and to fully embrace them. A colleague of mine who experienced psilocybin as part of a study recently told me that she had been in couples therapy for years. She and her partner had had some rough times early in their marriage. Despite a turn around in their marriage and all of the hard work that they had done on their relationship, she still had a hard time fully trusting her spouse. During her experience with psilocybin, her partner repeatedly

— and somewhat to her surprise — appeared in her mind as a force of protection and unconditional love. It has been months since the experience, but since then, her marriage has flourished and she feels a trust for her husband that she hadn't before. The psilocybin allowed her to shift the story she told herself about her partner. Studies demonstrate, (and I have seen this in my practice), that ketamine treatments often help people embrace new stories about drinking, smoking, using drugs, eating sugary food and eating meat, and their behaviors often shift quickly and dramatically as a result. A life-long smoker undergoes psychedelic treatments and never smokes again. Chronically anxious people are suddenly able to let go of anxiety and live in the moment. Devoted atheists find themselves certain that something greater than themselves exists. (See bit.ly/2RyjbCD.)

Hypnosis can accomplish many of the same results as psychedelics. I once knew a lawyer who suffered from crippling panic attacks. Years of traditional psychotherapy and multiple medication trials had failed to give him much relief. Though not a thorough believer in past lives, he had read about the power of past life regression under the influence of hypnosis to affect change, and he decided to try it. Over the course of about 10 "past life regressions" he experienced other worlds that were as vivid and real and this one and absolutely horrific. In one, for instance, he was a young woman experiencing drowning. But despite the terrifying nature of his hypnosis experiences, after the tenth session, he realized that he was no longer having panic attacks. He came to believe that the stories of danger and fear that he told himself came from somewhere else — not his own direct experience in this life. In the months and years ahead, he went on to live a full and adventuresome life largely free of the intense anxiety that he had experienced previously.

In many tribes of hunters and gatherers, the story tellers are the most valued members of the community. In one of my favorite children's books, "Frederick," by Leo Lionni, a young mouse appears to be lazily shirking his responsibilities as the other mice prepare for winter. In fact, he is busily collecting stories that in turn colorfully warm the hearts of his family through a bleak winter. The stories that we tell ourselves are critical to our well-being and our mindsets. Sometimes, they create states of chronic stress and high adrenaline, but they can also be soothing and healing. We are fortunate that the field of psychology is evolving to include a variety of new methods for helping us to change our stories to ones that let us live happier and healthier lives.

Dr. Charles Silberstein is a psychiatrist at Martha's Vineyard Hospital and Island Counseling Center, where he is the medical director. He is board-certified in

general, addiction, and geriatric psychiatry. He writes regularly about issues Islanders have with mental health.