

## ADVANCE PRAISE

*“Praise for Dr. D.’s research! By translating years of research and practice into a model anyone can access, Dr. D. provides a rich experience for the reader that involves rediscovering key life moments that influence how a story gets formed and performed in the real world. Story You Mean It reminds us of the importance of prioritizing the art and science of storytelling in our lives and how transformative and value-affirming such storytelling can be.”*

—CHIP CONLEY, AUTHOR OF *PEAK*; TWO-TIME *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *EMOTIONAL EQUATIONS* AND *WISDOM @ WORK*; FOUNDER AND FORMER CEO, JOIE DE VIVRE HOSPITALITY

*“This book takes you through the obstacle course of life and helps you make sense of it, then build and tell your story. It’s important because without a method or system, people—as I say—tend to stay on the couch! This book gets you moving forward in life. I focus on getting people off the couch and moving again, and Dr. D. gets people moving too...by guiding them to build and tell a personal story that keeps them on their real true north.”*

—JOE DE SENA, FOUNDER AND CEO, SPARTAN, THE WORLD’S LEADING OBSTACLE RACE; TWO-TIME *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*“Dr. D.’s work, Story Like You Mean It, gives people a structure to guide exploring their own key life moments en route to constructing a story worth listening to. Dr. D. played a significant role during our CatalystCreativ Catalyst Weeks as a part of the \$350 million revitalization of downtown Las Vegas. His unique method of teaching storytelling not only inspired all of the guests who participated, but he shifted the entire trajectory of our experiences. He changed the lives of so many people by teaching them to think about themselves and the world at large in an empowered way.”*

—AMANDA SLAVIN, CO-FOUNDER,  
CATALYSTCREATIV; FORBES 30 UNDER 30

*“People love to tell stories about their lives, and these storytelling moments give great pleasure to both the teller and the listener. But stories are more than that. Personalized storytelling can be the way forward to living a more effective and fruitful life. Story Like You Mean It offers a methodology for learning from life experiences and highlights a pathway for personal and professional development all in one. Dr. D. has worked to develop this approach for many years, and this work makes his insights readily available to multigenerational and multicultural audiences.”*

—DENNIS T. JAFFE, PHD, FAMILY BUSINESS  
FELLOW, SMITH FAMILY BUSINESS INITIATIVE AT  
CORNELL UNIVERSITY; CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

*“As an advocate for storytelling to help build awareness for needed lung cancer research, I used Dr. D. and the PeakStorytelling model to not only help lead survivor advocates to share their experiences with others to lobby for research and funding but also to help each person feel more positive about*

*their own path of life, embrace who they are, and illustrate their unique value.”*

—CHRIS DRAFT, CEO AND PRESIDENT, CHRIS DRAFT FAMILY FOUNDATION; NFL ALUMNUS

*“Story Like You Mean It is brilliant. The book showcases a perfect approach to shaping how personalized stories are shared. Dr. D.’s sense of others invites even me, who stories by nature, to consider how powerful language helps us showcase our unique gifts, talents, and motivations. It propels us to consider our past stories and how those previous experiences direct and carve one’s future. It is a clear and profoundly purposeful method of storytelling that sculpts value and worth in a world that has limited attention span and time. [This book] is a must-read if you want to get to know yourself better, learn how to get people to listen to what you have to say, and change your life.”*

—DR. WANDA HEADING GRANT, VICE PRESIDENT OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION, CLINICAL ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICE, UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

*“Our personal story underlies and impacts every decision we make and how we react to the world outside of ourselves. Story Like You Mean It offers a process and the tools to awaken us to our authentic selves and understand the narrative that drives everything from our leadership style to the way we engage in critical decision making and our shared experiences. I highly recommend it.”*

—MARGARET MCKENZIE, MD, PRESIDENT, CLEVELAND CLINIC SOUTH POINTE; ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SURGERY, CLEVELAND CLINIC LERNER COLLEGE OF MEDICINE, CLEVELAND, OHIO



**STORY LIKE YOU MEAN IT**



# STORY LIKE YOU MEAN IT

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HOW TO BUILD AND USE YOUR  
PERSONAL NARRATIVE  
TO ILLUSTRATE  
WHO YOU REALLY ARE



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DR. DENNIS REBELO



**LIONCREST**  
PUBLISHING

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STORY LIKE YOU MEAN IT

*How to Build and Use Your Personal Narrative  
to Illustrate Who You Really Are*

ISBN 978-1-5445-1964-7 *Hardcover*

978-1-5445-1962-3 *Paperback*

978-1-5445-1963-0 *Ebook*

978-1-5445-1965-4 *Audiobook*



*To my students at all ages and stages of life: without  
you, my story would be less rich—and impossible.*



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# INTRODUCTION

“Tell me about yourself.”

The person is taken by surprise. They hesitate, then start to mutter something about what school they went to, what jobs they’ve done, what their ambitions are. It sounds like website copy. It’s boilerplate; it’s an overpracticed, highly memorized elevator pitch. It has no flow, no character, no interest.

Maybe it’s not a complete train wreck, but they get the order tangled up and you see the frustration on their face as they realize they’ve lost the listener’s interest. It’s awkward for both of them.

They’re stumbling their tails off, and they finally blurt out, “How about you?”

The other person is ready. She explains in a few sentences the decisions and actions in her life, showing how she has overcome obstacles and worked with others to have ended up in this exact place at this exact time on her way to her next goal. This time, the listeners get it. They pay attention,

they buy into the story, they form a connection with the speaker.

We've all had times when we've been more like the first speaker, right? We can see that the other person isn't really listening. We kick ourselves and think "I should have said this" or "Why didn't I say that?"

It doesn't have to be like that.

### **SHAPE THE CONVERSATION**

Imagine walking into a room, say for a conference, job interview, or a business development meeting. Maybe you're a leader in your field. Maybe you're just looking to make your name for yourself. Whatever the situation, the stakes are high. You really want to be heard. You're prepped and ready. And then, inevitably—because it is almost inevitable—someone asks about what you've been up to.

"Tell me about yourself."

You're being given the chance to shape how someone judges you. You don't want to miss it. An uninspired story isn't just a poor story; it's a missed opportunity.

I'm going to show you how to take that opportunity to tell your PeakStory—the story that not only shows your value and worth but also shows how you got here and where you're going. And you're going to learn a lot more about yourself, your abilities, and your motivations.

When someone says, "Tell me about yourself," what they're

really saying is, “Show me what you can add to my life. Show me why I should listen to you.”

It’s the same when they say, “Tell me about your company.” That’s not what they really mean. What they really mean is, “Tell me about yourself—and why I should listen to you tell me about your company.”

We’ve all been there. Sometimes it happens to you; sometimes you watch it happen to someone else. One way or another, it happens to all of us, sooner or later. We get put on the spot because someone wants to know something that’s not about our job, not about our product—but about *us*.

The only reason we keep getting away with the same humdrum responses is that everyone else comes up with the same thing.

Whenever we walk into a conference, an interview, an orientation for work or school, or a sales meeting, people are wondering, “What value do you bring to the conference, the school, the service? Why are you trying to sell this thing or this service?” When they ask you about yourself, you see in their eyes that they want to hear something positive about *you*—but you default to the soundtrack: “I’ve got a dog and a cat named Felix, and they fight a lot.” “I really like the school. Good story: my aunt went here.” “I’m really glad to be here working for ABC Fidelity, Elemental LLC, PQR, Z [whatever...plug in the name]. I’ve been with the company for eight years, really great company to work with. And like, yeah, it’s good to be here.”

In terms of telling your own story, this is the net sum zero.

Today, everyone talks about what we're netting out in terms of energy. How much energy are we using? How much are we replacing? It's the same with telling our stories. Either you took energy away from the people in the room, or you brought positive energy to the room. Nobody ever walks away saying, "Boy, I met John. I'm completely neutral from having met John."

## **STORYPATHING™**

Your story is a great source of energy. Any chance to tell it is an opportunity to provide energy to others. But the energy doesn't come from the story alone. It comes from the value your story suggests you bring. That might be commercial value, social value, your value as a friend. It makes other people more willing to listen to you. And that's all that anybody needs, right? In an interview, a sales meeting, or at a conference or seminar.

We want people to listen.

What makes people listen is knowing that the very thing that you're doing right now, you're supposed to be doing. That you're aligned with your story. That this is where your story has brought you.

When you tell your story, it provides not only an anchor in the past but also a compass that points to where you're heading. It brings you to your current reality en route to a "somewhere" you're projecting. Psychologists call this making a *provisional identity claim*. I call it *storypathing*.

Storypathing says to the listener, "Here's where I've been. Here's where I am. Here's where I'm headed."



That stakes your provisional claim right there.

The next bit goes like this: “It all makes sense, doesn’t it? You feel energized. And don’t you want to support me? You think I have value and worth, and my story has shown that. Thanks. Because it’s my story, and I’ve thought about it and I’ve activated it.”

By storypathing, by making sense of where you’ve been and where you’re headed, you can show that you have more engagement and more value wherever you land because your story aligns with who you are.

If I understand that the very thing you’re trying to do right now is what you’re supposed to be doing, I will grant you some sort of opportunity. I’ll give you space or support. I’ll introduce you to more people. People have no problem extending a meeting or doing anything they can to help somebody get to this place of alignment.

We have an impulse to support people who are good at things. We buy tickets to see people who are good at singing; we go to plays to see good actors. If you’re good at telling your own story, people will buy in. They’ll see not only that you’re good at what you’re doing but also that you have evidence of your value because the evidence is embedded in the story.

You’re talking the talk because you walked the walk.

### **“CAN I DO IT?”**

You might look at your life and worry that you don’t have the kind of experiences that will let you storypath. Wrong!

If you've lived twelve years on the planet or ninety-two, you can tell your story to show your value.

We all can. Storytelling isn't foreign to us. We did it habitually when we were younger. For whatever reason, we fell out of practice, but it's still latent within us. It's an unused muscle we can start using again.

It's not just telling a story, like relating an anecdote or having a chat. It's more than arriving at a meeting and saying the traffic was really bad so I'm a little bit late. That says nothing about you.

Storypathing is an act of self-authorship, but it's also a method for discerning lived experiences. Anyone can drift through a "normal" life. They're not that engaged in the world, and the world's not that interested in them. When you storypath, the world makes more sense because you're making more sense of it. (Trust me, it all makes sense!)

Storypathing helps a person live what some psychologists call a phenomenal life—not meaning phenomenal as in fantastic but phenomenal as in full of phenomena: in other words, facts, occurrences, and circumstances. A branch of psychology called phenomenology teaches basically that a phenomenal life is a life of full awareness of one's feelings and connections and how they occurred.

In other words, everything starts with *you*.

## YOUR PEAKSTORY

Storypathing allows you to put together your best narrative in the best way to create your PeakStory.

PeakStorytelling is a method of storypathing to identify and prioritize life moments to build our story, which we then share with others. It gathers self-event connections, which are moments and experiences that echo through the rest of our lives, and it overcomes two main obstacles that prevent us from telling our PeakStory.

First, most of our lives don't include a lot of purposeful reflection that allows us to drill down into the meaning of what's happened in the past. Although many people achieve moments of reflection through therapy, a spiritual approach, or being out in nature, that reflection isn't systematic. Those moments fall short because they're disconnected. They can't tell your story *over time*.

PeakStorytelling begins with self-reflection. We can't express ourselves unless we can make sense of ourselves. Otherwise, we might as well just post pictures on Instagram that reveal next to nothing about us. You can't judge someone from a picture; you can't show worth through a picture. Yet, we take that course because it's just far easier to post a picture than to reflect deeply on moments in time.

Systematic, purposeful reflection holds the key to PeakStorytelling. We have to go inside before we go out. The search is the ultimate research.

Second, we've abandoned our desire to be heard because we're surrounded by resistance to telling our stories—every-

one's posting photos and we follow suit. We've given up our ability to explain who we are. We resist telling our stories because no one else is doing it. And we don't have a tool to work through resistance in a sensible way. That's why we need to activate the story muscle to start it moving again.

When you learn to storypath, the conscious process of bringing your identity together with your narrative becomes your story over time. Storypathing leverages the PeakStory method to select which parts of your story to tell to get people to listen, understand, and appreciate.

## **CREATING A SYSTEM**

The PeakStory structure is a purposeful, research-driven methodology that gets you to the stuff that matters in your own story. It grew out of my PhD dissertation, which brought together two disciplines: humanistic psychology and organizational systems. Combining those two fields gave me not only an understanding of the structure of the brain but also an awareness of how to assemble pieces of one's life in sensible ways for high-stakes moments.

To put it simply, there are occasions when it really matters that you're heard for who you are and why you add value. When you need to be a story wizard.

As humans, we're all handlers and collectors of lived experiences. Well, those experiences are the raw material of your story.

Over and over while I was researching, I watched people get a chance to tell their story and goof it up. Or maybe miss it altogether.

Unless they were the leader, of course, because the leader always gets to tell his or her story and is never challenged, because who's going to stop someone when we all need their signature on a paycheck, right? One reason I came up with the PeakStory method is because, my whole life, I've seen storytelling privileges given to people who are in power, yet not to those people who want to be honored as experts or value creators.

That's not good for anyone or for any business.

One of my aims is to take research-based data and turn it into something that works in the real world or to take what I observe in the real world and turn it into a system. A system is repeatable. That makes it useful and gives it value.

A woman I coached recently, Whitney, put it like this: "If something you see in life is beautiful, it's worth duplicating. It needs a system that can help that duplication become possible."

Well, that describes what I do. And that system for duplication became my obsession (and eventually the PeakStory method). I became hypervigilant about people's stories, and I began to see patterns.

### **THREE TYPES OF STORY**

I realized that when people used strong stories about self-preservation or overcoming obstacles, those stories woke listeners up so they could see value. I called those hero stories.

People still couldn't see full value, however, because we don't

just want somebody to be a hero warrior. We also want to feel that somebody can work with others.

So I started to identify these working-together stories, which I named collaborative stories.

When people put together hero and collaborative stories, I saw they were not only explaining how they had come to be where they were but also getting insights into how they could live a better version of their inner selves.

I call the stories that combine hero and collaborative the super-self or virtuous story. These are good-work stories, good-life stories.

I realized that if you can tell all three types of story, then your listener can understand:

- You're credible (Hero)
- You can work with others (Collaborative)
- You're en route to the most virtuous version of yourself (Virtuous)

You've also made yourself more relational by backtracking your story and knowing those multiple self-event connections. Because those self-event connections are rooted in the real world and real experiences.

As I started to notice these real experiences, I started to nuance how to onboard them into a story that would become a PeakStory. I learned to nuance storytelling performance.

When you tell a provocative, relationally impactful story, you

get people's attention and they want to talk to you more. Period. You get them to see value in you for who you are, and it's liberating. I felt changed. I saw how others changed.

I wrote my dissertation, but those stories kept coming into play whenever I was coaching people in public speaking. So I took my ideas and created a couple of visuals and started pressing them into classes around public speaking. People became liberated by them. I watched students hit resistance to storypathing, then learn to go to their formative experiences, unpack them, and be relationally changed by them. People started saying, "I thought this was going to be a public-speaking class, but it transformed my life."

So I came up with the PeakStory method.

It's based on academic research, backed by over a decade of teaching around public speaking and coaching leaders of organizations in high-stakes moments. I co-founded the Sports Mind Institute. Some NFL people called me in. Companies called me in, such as Sennheiser, the German audio company. Academics. Police. Students. I've led educational activities here, there, and wherever. I've spoken outside of Zappos as part of their downtown community program. I have online students on US Navy ships and on the other side of the world.

Now it's your turn. Are you excited? You should be. You've gotten to know a little about who I am, and now I'm going to help you get to know yourself a whole lot better—and how to introduce your new self to others.

Ready? Let's start this adventure together.

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## EXERCISE: YOUR STORY JOURNAL

The PeakStory method is just that—a method. It's a practical way to achieve something.

And practical means practice.

So if you think this is a regular book that you're going to read in your easy chair or on the couch, you're wrong. This is not that kind of book. This book is going to show you stuff, tell you stuff, explain stuff. You'll need to grab a pen or your laptop.

That way, you get the full deal. When I coach people or they do the method online, they get interaction. That's why you'll find exercises between each chapter in this book. You need to think about stuff, write about it, put it into action.

You're not being shortchanged. This is it. This is the method. But to get the most out of this book, be prepared to put some work in.

It's nothing to be worried about. It won't feel like work. It's fun because it's all me search.

Finding out about yourself. What could be easier?

The exercises bring together theory, which is the thinking, with practice, which is the doing.

You might feel they slow you down. You might feel frustrated because you want to get right to telling your PeakStory.

My advice is this. Don't rush. One step leads to the next step. Trust me. This works.



The first exercise couldn't be easier. It's not even an exercise.

You'll need a journal to keep track of your progress. It could be anything. You could take a trip to the stationer's for a fancy notebook, or root through your desk to find an old legal pad, or grab a handful of sheets of paper you can clip together. You could just create a new file on your computer or tablet.

You just need somewhere to make notes, do the exercises, and refer back to them.

Once you've got that, we're ready to start storypathing.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# THE CASE FOR STORYTELLING

*From the Garden of Eden  
to the branches of Macintosh  
apple picking has always come at a great cost  
iPod iMac iPhone iChat  
I can do all of these things without making eye contact*

—MARSHALL DAVIS JONES, FROM  
HIS POEM “TOUCHSCREEN”

When was the last time you *really* connected with someone’s story?

It probably wasn’t recently.

That’s no surprise. There’s not enough storytelling today. We have few invitations to tell our story, and when they turn up, we’re often like, “Er, um, okay, let me see...” because we’re out of practice.

It’s nobody’s fault. It’s the way things are. But it’s not healthy. We’re losing the ability to make meaningful relationships with others. And the worst thing is, you keep wearing the same

pattern down over and over again: the chance to speak comes, and you miss it. The version of yourself you put forward isn't the best you. In systems thinking, this sort of repetition is called a virtuous snowball effect, if it's good, or a vicious snowball effect, if the results are negative.

Failing to tell your story well is a vicious snowball effect because you just keep repeating the cycle. And the more you repeat it, the more your brain feels comfortable in terms of neuroplasticity, which is its physical ability to reshape how you think. Your brain doesn't seem to want to change at times. It prefers familiarity and comfort. Who wouldn't want to feel comfortable in a situation where people don't know you and the stakes are high? You don't want to try something new.

So you're going to repeat the same story that didn't interest listeners last time or the time before, because it's comfortable. But the reality is that the comfort creates no reward for you or the listener, does it?

Because you're not creating relationships.

## **MOVE AWAY FROM ROUTINE**

Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT who studies technology, connectedness, and the human condition, describes the modern world like this: "We expect more from technology and less from each other."

The way I put it is that our world is overconnected but underrelational.

Technology connects us to everyone in every place. It lets

me teach people on the other side of the United States or in Europe. I appreciate it, of course, but I think everyone sometimes despairs of how it gets in the way of our ability to think or relate deeply.

Our devices connect us wherever we want to be mentally wherever we are physically. This tricks us into thinking that we're involved, but that's just not the case. Technology has not advanced enough, in the words of my friend Marshall Davis Jones, to make us human again. It pulls us away from reflection and from each other. Our thoughts, frankly, are not as deep as they once were or could be.

We're losing the ability to forge relationships at the very time it's easier than ever for us to make more connections.

Technology pulls us away from reflection about those moments in our lives that have some sort of weight or significance in informing who we are—our self-events or self-event connections. Without these connections, we become a thin version of ourselves rather than a fully matured version, which means we present ourselves like a “beyond perfect” Instagram picture that doesn't actually capture the context and depth of who we really are.

It's a partial image. It's like falling in love with a new house online, then going to the neighborhood and seeing there's an oil refinery across the street or they're mining rocks. Or maybe you're a bit meh, but you go take a look and the house has a wonderful view over a lake, or a fine park next door, or is close to the train station. In some cases, a fuller picture reveals problems, but in others, it adds value.

## OBSTACLES TO STORY

To form relationships, you need to add value, but the people you want to listen are busy. They're distracted by their own technology-driven lives. Technology doesn't only decrease our self-reflection. It also reduces the amount of time we have to tell our story. It quashes our empathy, or our ability to relate to those whose stories we hear, and that's something else we need to recover.

Technology and the lack of opportunities for meaningful reflection are not the only barriers to meaningful storytelling. It's also habitual. According to the science writer Charles Duhigg, there's a social cue for most forms of interaction. The cue triggers a routine, and then we get a reward.

In public speaking, the social cue is somebody saying, "Okay, now it's your turn." Or maybe it's just a look, or the person before you has finished speaking, and now it's your turn. But those chances don't come along too often, and when they do, they're usually fairly routine.

Most nonroutine opportunities are reserved for the leaders, right? You know, the people in charge of the "talking stick." Not for those who want to show their own value.

The social cues tend to reward those who adhere to the routine. People who say more or less just what everybody else said, and what everyone has said before. You're rewarded with more opportunity to speak out if you stick to the script, if you keep things comfortable.

But do you want comfort? Or do you want to be known as

being valuable? Do you want a technological connection or a deep relationship based on your worth and value?

It's hard to abandon comfort, so you're going to resist to telling your story. The good news is that the PeakStory method removes the resistance for you. It has for people from fourteen years old up to ninety years old, so you can feel just fine about it.

Relax, you'll be good. No anxiety required.

### **TAKE YOUR SWING**

When the moment comes, when people's eyes rise above their devices, you have to be ready to step in the batter's box and swing.

“Why are you standing in front of me?” “Tell me about yourself.” One strike and you're out. They're looking down again.

Think about the next moment when you'll likely need to tell your story. Is it a client development conversation? Are you entering a new job? Are you returning as an alum? Are you a guest speaker at a conference or on Zoom? Are you in a high-stakes networking environment?

You need a story and you don't quite have it. You can't think of anything different to say, so you say what everyone else says. You're going to play the same music everyone else is playing. You're going to tell the story formatted like everybody else. And you're going to get a response like everybody else. Unless you're ready to show your value in a PeakStory.

## GENERATIVE DIALOGUE

With a PeakStory, you're going to awaken the listener and start to increase the likelihood of generative dialogue. That's a to-and-from between the speaker and listener that gets you somewhere new. It breaks new ground.

When you do that, you're going to start to win people over through personal story. And they'll start unveiling their life moments as well. Whether it's in their spoken language, body language, or tone of voice, you'll notice signs that suggest they understand you. They *get* you.

The very essence of storytelling is creating this loop between the teller and the listener. Even if you're speaking to a large audience, a dialogical quality can come out. While you're talking, you should be feeling more personally connected and relationally significant to others. You'll see this yourself soon enough by way of watching others respond to you. And that should make you feel liberated.

Think of it this way. Every time you repeat the expected story, every time you're singing the same old song, it's as if your finger is digging a groove into the sand on the beach, deeper and deeper. So when it's time to talk, which is when the water comes up, it rolls right into that pathway. Right? The same old path.

The wrong path.

You need to draw a new path. You need to reroute your patterns of referencing key elements of who you are in your story, whether it's a sixty-second, ninety-second, three-and-a-half-minute, or eight-minute telling, or it's prolonged across a thirty-minute speech.



## WHY STORY?

I've seen many examples of the transformative nature of telling your own story. They surprise even me, right, and it's *my* method.

Take a student of mine named Hannah, who was an immigrant to this country. She was a female wrestler who wrestled against the boys, so you can tell she was very confident. At the beginning of the class, when I first introduced the system, she took a pause. "Whoa, wait a minute. I've got to really rethink. I can't just be confident in speaking, I actually have to speak *to* something."

So she went a little deeper and looked at her life. Lo and behold, about nine weeks later, at the end of the class, she said to me almost nonchalantly, "Hey, Doc. I told my story in that interview with the Rhode Island Foundation and I got the scholarship." I said, "Wait, you did what?" She said, "Yeah, I told my story, just like we did in class."

And I said, "Wait a minute. Whoa. Hannah told her story and got a scholarship. Was it a good scholarship?" She goes, "Oh yeah, it's \$20,000." And I said, "Twenty thousand dollars to tell your story?" And she said, "Well, yeah, \$20,000 a year at any school I want." I said, "Wait a minute. It's four years, so that's \$80,000! Congratulations."

She said, "Yeah, it really feels good to be myself and be rewarded for it. Now I want to talk to you about telling my story for the internship I want."

I told her, "Ooh, you're addicted to story!"

This is the sort of thing that can happen with the PeakStory

method. It can help overcome problems. It has proven outcomes.

## **YOU WRITE THE STORY**

Turning into a PeakStoryteller comes at a little bit of a cost, but it's only really your time. You're worth it. In return, it sparks meaning, remembrance, and nostalgia. It also allows you to become a screenwriter in your own Netflix or Amazon Prime series, so you start to build up your life episodes like those TV sizzlers to get people's interest. You can turn the episodes up or down. You get to be the director, the producer, the editor, all using your lived moments.

You start to realize that there's meaning in your life events and that you can shape that meaning. You feel better about yourself, with more personal connection. Your body language changes when you meet people, introduce yourself, do client development meetings, give a speech as a leader, a CEO, a business owner. Your body no longer lies or undermines you. Your voice tone improves. You're calm, less twitchy. You're not blinking or flailing your hands. You tell your own story, and that makes you feel more settled.

When you resist telling your PeakStory, you continue down the same groove, just like everyone else. You know that you're not like everyone else, but the more you repeat the same old story, the deeper the groove. Your lived experiences lie lost beneath dirt and leaves and brush, leaving you emotionally unsettled because you're not saying who you truly are.

## STORY FOR BUSINESS

When people hear your PeakStory, they start to hear the humanistic side of your narrative. But they also hear the business applications.

Our lived experiences are connected to those of other people, so your story sparks a response that's not purely analytical. It's beyond "What's your balance sheet?" or "What's your return on investment?" Straightaway, there's a human connection, so this becomes a more humanistic business exchange.

Isn't that what we all want from our high-stakes face-to-face conversations, whether they're live or online? Don't we want our work to be grounded in our nature as humans?

We may want that outcome, but there's still a challenge: "How do I form or synthesize my story?"

When I started creating the PeakStory model, I asked Howard Gardner, the Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard, about the use of storytelling in business. Gardner is well known for his theory of multiple intelligences. He followed up that work with his idea of the "five minds for the future." Gardner notes that everyone will have to develop these "five minds," which he summarizes as a *disciplined mind*, to learn at least one profession; a *synthesizing mind*, to organize massive amounts of information; a *creating mind*, to investigate new phenomena and unasked questions; a *respectful mind*, to appreciate differences between human beings; and an *ethical mind*, to fulfill our obligations as citizens.

Gardner clearly saw the value of what would become the PeakStory model to enable entrepreneurs to communicate

their particular synthesis of knowledge to sell their ideas. He believed the approach I offered was needed, writing, “I agree that synthesis is vital for the business entrepreneur and you rightly point out that the entrepreneur needs to be able to communicate their synthesis to others. Borrowing a term from education, the entrepreneur needs pedagogical knowledge about how to synthesize to those with varying degrees of knowledge or expertise.”

The PeakStory method provides just what Gardner suggests is needed: a map, system, and process for helping business folks with the challenge of synthesizing their value.

## **ADDING VALUE**

In business, speaking poorly means you don’t get another shot. No one invites you back if it takes seventeen reps to get your story straight. No one says, “That didn’t go so well, but you can try to sell to me again.” No one says, “It was a poor interview, but no problem, make another appointment. I’ll be glad to send you a link to my calendar and you can book five more hours for your practice on me since I have nothing else to do other than listen to you.”

You need to show up ready to honor not just your own story but also the human being with whom you’re about to speak. Let’s not blow their time. Let’s give them a real show. Tell them your sizzlers: past, near past, now, likely future. That’s really it. The sizzlers tell the story.

At this point, you start to rediscover that storytelling muscle. You start to become hyperconscious of moments where you can speak to your future and explain your path.

Once you start spotting the pieces, which you inevitably will, you can start putting them together, though it's going to take you a little while. You're going to get really enlivened to *go live* fast, but there's still work to do. There's no place to hide once you go live—take the time to prepare first.

For now, look out for those moments that add value to your life, such as overcoming an obstacle or working creatively with others. The more you see, the more of them you'll notice. It's like when you buy a pair of shoes in a particular style and you start to realize how many other people have those same shoes. Or you buy a Volkswagen and you start to realize how many people drive a Volkswagen Golf.

Identifying these other examples gives validation to our choice. It's a cycle. Your heightened awareness leads to focus and that leads to reward: in this case, validation. That's what will happen with the PeakStory method. You become more focused, you present your story, and you get a reward.

## **KEEPING IT REAL**

TV is full of stories.

Why can we watch previews on Netflix or other streaming services? So we can tell whether a show is worth watching, right? So we can evaluate the story.

What's interesting is how quickly we do it. Think about it. You watch a minute or two of a sizzler, and you decide that you're in or out. That's how we make purchase decisions, buying in or not.

Why did you buy this book? Maybe it was the title. Maybe it

was my bio in the back: “Dr. D. has worked with people in pro sports.” Something struck you and you bought the book. You signed up to reading about fifty thousand words based on reading, what, one hundred words? Two hundred?

By the way, how much work do you think went into the title and the biography? A lot. Because they’re the only chance to make you think the book might be worth your time.

A Netflix sizzler is the same—and so is storytelling. When you tell someone your story, you’re really asking them to see that you have value. That you deserve their time or money, or both. That they should show you to somebody who could hire you, use your services, somebody in their company who could engage in a consulting conversation, some advisor. You’re lobbying for value because value earns opportunity.

## **THE PRICE OF VALUE**

All sorts of modern studies show that people want to be valued at work. Today’s workers want meaningful work and self-expression.

Where can they get it? I mean the way to expressing themselves meaningfully about work? We don’t give it to them in the HR department. We don’t give it to them in college. One school that wanted the PeakStory program didn’t even have a communication or rhetoric department.

Imagine the advantage you’ll have once you can speak your PeakStory. Those who can’t speak follow the masses, the same old groove. But if you can speak, you can activate agency and free will. You can start to author your own life and be more actively involved in it.

## **SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY**

In psychology, this self-authoring aligns perfectly with what's called self-determination theory. It's really the ability to go and get something out of life.

Self-determination theory has three parts: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Current research building on seminal work in self-determination theory found that humans want to be psychologically well and feel good in terms of our motivation, development, and wellness. At a basic level, we need to feel like we can make our own choices, which is autonomy. Then we need to be able to have relationships with others. And we also need to become competent in something.

As we'll see in the next chapter, the PeakStorytelling method will get you to a place where you're acknowledging these three parts—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—you're being acknowledged in turn by your narrative.

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### **EXERCISE: BE MORE ALIEN**

This is our first real exercise. Remember, it's not a chore. It involves a little effort, but that's because I'm going to ask you to think differently than usual about things. It might take a bit of getting used to!

I want to make you more aware of story: how many times you get to tell your own, and how many times you hear somebody else tell theirs.

To do this, you're going to become an ethnologist, which is the academic term for someone who studies people. We don't need to bother with the qualifications; just imagine you're an alien who has just landed on Earth and is trying to figure out all about humans by watching—and *listening*.

First, choose a location where you can eavesdrop. Maybe you're at a conference. You might be killing time in the park or at an airport. Maybe you're sitting with a coffee in a café. You might be in your office.

It's harder in places that use social distancing, but ideally it needs to be somewhere where you can hear people introduce themselves or bring their friends up to speed. Failing a real-life situation, try listening to chat shows or interviews on the TV or radio.

Listen to what people say. Think about where the stories are located. Are they at the beginning of phone calls? Are they part of formal introductions or a voice teleconference call with multiple parties, a video-based call, a live interaction?

What types of stories or moments within stories are standing out? What makes you zone out?

You're looking for hits and misses, strikes and balls. Do you notice someone completely failing to hit the target?

If you want to kick it up a notch, what do you see in the body language of the listener? Or the speaker? Are you seeing signs that someone is zoning out?

Think about what you hear and see. What are you learning about



this alien species? Which stories make connections and which fail to do so?

Make a list of both and write it in your journal. Take notes of anything that stood out.

You're tuning your social radar—and your social radar is also your *story* radar.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# UNDERSTAND YOUR STORY, UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

*“It is an ironic habit of human beings to run faster when we have lost our way.”*

—ROLLO MAY

In the past, storytelling always came with power.

When you think about the people who got to tell their stories, it was always teachers and principals, the leaders of departments or organizations, politicians or celebrities. Throughout our lives, it's been the people in charge who have had the storytelling privileges. They're the same people who control the meeting: what time it starts, what time it ends, whether it happens late.

(Which is fine by us. As long as they still sign the paycheck, right?)

That's not the deal anymore. A Willis Towers and Watson study of employee experience in 2014 found that workers

today want a qualitatively different outcome than workers of past generations. They're not just looking for salary or promotion. They're searching for meaningful work.

Welcome to the world of the flip.

We no longer see work as a situation with leaders versus followers; instead, everyone is a member with a voice. Student voices matter in universities, colleges, and schools. Worker voices matter in organizations. Those who lacked privileges have become the equals of those who had the power—and often become more powerful.

### **STORY MATTERS**

Now that everyone has a voice and a story, it doesn't make your story less important. It makes it more important. If every voice matters, every story matters.

As the hierarchy of the top-down organization disappears, everyone gets more opportunity to tell their story. In the world of the flip, everyone's a leader.

Listen to this observation from a key leadership professor, Warren Bennis, who passed away a few years ago: "Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself; it is precisely that simple and it is also that difficult."

Well, we're going to make it easier.

Let me tell you why I love that quote. Because a leader is anyone who can influence others, so becoming a leader is also synonymous with learning how to influence people. There's

only one way to do that: communication. Which means that you can also become yourself by learning to communicate in a way that influences others (combined, to be sure, with putting in some work).

That's what storytelling does. It helps us become ourselves. It allows us to answer the age-old question, "Who am I anyway?"

And, in doing so, "Tell me about yourself."

The PeakStorytelling method teaches us how to reclaim our voice to tell our story. It shows us how our experiences of identity shape the way we present ourselves to the world—and the way the world accepts us.

Identity can be meaningfully brought into being through rhetoric, by which I don't mean fancy elocution and elucidation. Rhetoric is simply a name for approaching the spoken word through a method—PeakStorytelling—that provides an apparatus for telling your story.

## **IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU**

We've known for decades that telling your story is a way to better understand yourself. Psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Rollo May have been writing for decades about how self-expression can release people from their cages.

It's an approach broadly termed humanism. At its heart is the notion that understanding yourself encourages positive selfishness: using self-knowledge to best achieve your goals, always with an awareness of others and your relationships, of course. Positive selfishness encourages us to ask ourselves,

“How am I going to know myself better en route to claiming the thing I want: the job, the interview, the school, the promotion, the responsibility?”

I’m not going to jump into the research as much as I could. That’s too much detail.

To put it simply, “Hey, you matter.”

You always mattered. I know that. But in the world of the flip, it’s more acceptable. Society says that it’s okay for you to matter.

Take the rise of social media. Now that everyone has a platform, everyone is busy trying to tell his or her own story through the ideal picture or the ideal post. They’re looking for something that says, “I am kind of this person here in this... Instagram picture, this Facebook post, this tweet, this TED Talk video...whatever is the platform of the day.”

People use social media to project a version of themselves. We’ve already seen that psychologists call this a provisional identity claim. It’s intended to give an impression of you to anyone who sees the picture or post—but it’s provisional because it can be changed when they find out more about you or meet you. A provisional identity claim doesn’t tell your full story. In effect, it just says, “I think this is kind of cool.”

Look at your friends’ Instagram posts. Do they ever say anything more meaningful than that? It’s as if someone is asked, “Tell me about yourself” and says, “Hey, I went surfing on Tuesday and it was awesome. The sun was just over the horizon, man. It was first light.”

That's not storytelling. It's a report. It doesn't reveal all of you.

## **SELF-EVENT CONNECTIONS**

The PeakStory method is based on self-event connections.

If you don't know the phrase, no cause for alarm. Self-events are meaningful moments in your life that link to wider influences on you. Self-event connections, in other words, are the evidence that something matters or mattered to you. They come from all areas of our life: our work, our family and friends, our recreation, our spiritual lives. To express yourself in your PeakStory, you need to study yourself, discover these self-event connections, and unpack what they mean.

We've all learned to keep these threads separate in our lives. We don't cross lanes. Mommy and Daddy probably taught you not to. (And they signed your paycheck, right? Their house, their rules.) Your PeakStory teaches you that those lanes aren't impenetrable. Leaders cross them all the time to create the best version of themselves.

Well, now it's not just the CEO who can cross lanes. Now that storytelling is more democratized, we all can.

## **CLAIMING POWER**

If becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming oneself, becoming oneself must also be synonymous with becoming a leader. Which is another way of saying that you gain power. There are different sorts of power. Position power comes from title or position, say, within an organization. Coercive power means you have the ability to punish people for not

doing something, and reward power means you can reward them if they do.

We can't all access those forms of power, but there's one power we *can* access: expert power. Anyone can put expertise into their story—but some ways are more effective than others. And once you can do it effectively, you can achieve referent power, too: the kind of power that comes from being likable and being able to foster good relationships. As a leader and communicator, you wind up with the two best sources of power. Who wants to be known as the person with the title who has the power to give out the carrots and the sticks? That's not how people want to be led today.

If you simply say, "I have a degree," that's a bit flat, like "I have a PhD and MBA. I went to this school, I have this certification." Instead of saying, "Here's my degree from ABC tech school," how much better to say that you were handed down how to be a designer-craftsman from your grandfather, who was a master woodworker-cabinetmaker. That story underlines your claim to expertise and does so with a likable style. It illustrates how to access the types of power people seek in those they trust.

You get that. It's straightforward. Maybe you can already see how you can twist part of your own story to make a bit more of a claim. You want to go out and try it.

Don't.

You're not ready to rush in and say, "Hey, this is why my identity has value." We have to do the work, people.

Before we can embed self-event connections into storytelling,



we have to find out which ones are important. We have to dive backward and ask, “Who am I?”

## **THE MAGNIFICENT NINE**

Self-event connections aren't always easy to identify because we're all running pretty fast in our lives. You've had hundreds or thousands of these foundational experiences. The Peak-Story method will help you find just a handful.

How many? Nine, that's all. If you can identify nine experiences, you're in the game. You're playing to win: to win attention, to win the listener's ear. To win value points because you showed that you have value and worth.

Once you've identified these experiences, I'll show you how to examine, expand, and label them to identify their ingredients. What competency did you show you were good at? What were your motivations? What was the “power of the place” you were in? What kind of people were around you?

Breathe easy. It's not some kind of academic assignment.

It's just looking back at your own life in a slightly different way.

## **YOUR OWN HIGHLIGHT REEL**

Most of the time, we're so busy that we communicate without much reflection: “Hey, I went surfing on Tuesday and it was awesome.” But there are lived experiences just underneath the surface, so we need to unearth them so we can embed them in our story. They're the sizzlers that make you think, “Ooh, I want to see that movie.” We need to pick out the bits

that gain interest, that get us noticed. That makes the dog do the doggy head tilt.

The story doesn't have to be radically unexpected, although it might be, but it sparks attention to get the audience out of their anesthetic state. It tells them that you understand your story and therefore you understand yourself. That understanding is embodied in the different moments they didn't expect to show up. They expected references to your degree, where you live, the number of kids—the standard drone. Instead, they got the real stuff. It slaps them in the head, tells them to wake up.

Doggy head tilt.

Human beings have a wonderful social radar. Even if it's been on snooze for a while, we wake up when somebody diverts from the standard story.

Just check out why some videos become viral. It's because they're earnest, they're clear, and they get attention.

## **EXPLORING LIVED LIFE**

When we've identified your experiences, we're going to tag them for how useful they can be for telling your story. We'll rank them. This one's a nine. This one's maybe a five; let me stick with it for a while and think. This one's just a two. I can't include it, but it did help me understand something about myself.

The way to do that is to go back to the experience, think about it, then think about it again. Think and rethink.

To use the vocabulary of phenomenology, a phenomenon is anything significant that has happened in your life. Edmund Husserl, who founded the approach in the early 1900s, believed that if a person examined and reexamined their lives, they would have a heightened awareness of their experiences. I originally called the PeakStory method *phenomenological storytelling* because it honors that approach. I learned to use phenomenology in grad school as a social science research method to study the quality of lived experiences.

From an academic standpoint, it was really cool. From a practical standpoint, it was even cooler. It just made sense.

Maybe you're saying to yourself, "Well, I've thought about these bits of my life before." Sure you have. It's your life, after all.

But have you rethought it three or four or five times? Have you journaled about it? Have you identified the ingredients of the lived experience? Have you thought about the people and places involved, the mental muscles, the motivation? Did you use leadership, creativity, adaptability, your analytical skillset? Did competencies pair together to make you an inspirational leader? Did you do it reactively to some trigger, or did you do it proactively?

Those are the kinds of questions you'll learn to ask as you start to explore your makeup. You'll learn to see what value to give to past experiences, what universal competencies they express, and how they create positive energy.

## IDENTITY CONTENT

The key to your story is identity content. How does an experience add to the creation of your identity?

A psychology researcher named Jane Dutton and her colleagues looked at this question in 2010. They suggested that people have the best chance to proclaim a positive identity by aligning with one of six different behaviors. A person can validate their positive identity claim by identifying with one of just six positive types: virtuous, favorable, progressive, adaptive, balanced, and complimentary—all of which, by the way, can also be elements of a PeakStory.

It seemed simple, but it led me to ask myself, “How does someone structure storytelling to include such lived experiences?”

I realized that the real story here is that people want identity content. They want to understand other people and their worth, and they want the identity content to be supported by evidence.

Look at it like this. A good lawyer cites precedents as evidence from old cases when they’re lobbying the judge to believe them. Maybe you’re not an inspirational orator, as seen in trials on TV, but you can humbly insert your lived experiences when storytelling—and those experiences also have value in making your case.

That’s why we’ll learn how to think about your intention so that you can pick the right evidence from your life for your particular audience and, in turn, get what you want from them in response.

In this method, there’s a big tilt to me search. Me search is the best research (I like to add that because it’s true).

Even by simply using PeakStorytelling methodology to build your story, you're more self-aware. When you decide to tell your story, you'll get more. You're relationally more in tune. You're contextually more intelligent because you understand the context of your storytelling at a particular time, place, to a specific person or group of people while preserving your intention.

## **ELIMINATE THE NEGATIVE**

Let's talk about what can go wrong.

Think about how everybody else tells their story. The language they use. "I'm very credentialized in this field." "I've had my CFA for a number of years." "I've worked for Lehman Brothers." "Edward Jones was a friend of my grandfather."

You know what? When you put it like that, I don't care. Right? I don't care. No one does.

In psychology, this kind of elevator pitch awakens in the mind of a listener what's called a negative cognitive script. It's like an undesirable reaction that lights up in someone's brain. Subconsciously, it encourages people to judge you and your behaviors in a negative way.

Another way to put it is, "Hell, you put me to sleep. I zoned out there."

People in similar work-identity positions sometimes use the same language sets—and that repetition creates a negative cognitive script. It's like anesthesia for the listener. Worse, it can cause the listener to take cover or run and hide. Mentally, they shut the speaker down and out.

So the question is, have you done the me search/research to tell a story people will hear, or are you going to let others have the power to judge you?

I'll give you an example of the power of negative cognitive scripts so that you'll be sure that you got it. Say you're looking for a car, maybe a Camry or a BMW or whatever it might be. Online, you've seen dozens, hundreds, even thousands of these cars. But when you show up to a dealership and somebody approaches you and asks, "Can I help you?" the first thing you do is respond by saying, "No, I'm just looking."

Nonsense! Of course they can help you. That's why you're there.

But instead, you've lied to this person who might be, say, a retired schoolteacher, a former cop, a straight-A student. Why? Because you've heard language that we perceive as negative—"Can I help you?"—within the context of a car dealership, which has always been riddled with negative associations.

I feel bad for car people. So many of them are such good people, and they get negated because the negative script is so strong. You actually don't even want to know about why they might be selling cars. You don't care. You won't listen.

That's how a work role can create a massive, prejudicial mischaracterization of who someone is.

## **THE THIN SLICE**

The writer Malcolm Gladwell talks about the concept of the

thin slice. I call it a misslice. It describes looking at somebody and instead of seeing the whole thing, you just see a slice—and it's the wrong slice. So instead of judging a person correctly, you get it wrong, based on the wrong evidence.

That's what happens if you don't have your story ready. Somebody gives you the liberty of a self-introduction or a high-stakes networking moment, and you flub your story.

Instead, your physical traits, characteristics, and role identity start to overwhelm your story. They squelch anything that you say. They leave the listener with a misslice.

And if all you're going to say is what everybody else says, that serves to validate the negative or nonpositive evaluation.

You could have gotten it right, but you goofed it.

## **MEET THE BLUE DOTS**

You have to do the work. It starts with studying your self-event connections and formative experiences.

My term is blue dots. When I did the original PeakStory diagram on a whiteboard, I grabbed a blue marker to color the dots representing these moments. I stuck to it. Blue makes me feel better. It makes me think of a blue-sky moment when you see clearly. Life is good. So people in my classes started to call them blue dots.

That's what we call them.

You could have a hundred blue-dot moments, but our work

has discovered that it's good to focus on about nine. From those nine, you're going to pick three. As you go on, you may rotate through the other dots, so they matter, too, but you'll use three in the work you'll do here.

### *Joining the Dots*

It may be that you don't recognize your blue dots at the moment. That's no cause for worry because we're going to help you. Just be aware that three will emerge. And *you'll* pick them. We can't predict them.

What those three are depends on when and where you tell your story.

Telling your story is situational. It's targeted. Like a custom video-streaming moment, it shows a particular character at a particular time. So if I'm speaking to somebody who's in the US Navy versus a nonengineer who loves the arts and who does development work in the Berkshires around MASS MoCA, my story would not accent my time at LaSalle Military Academy in the same way. I could choose another formative experience completely.

You don't have to use the same blue dots in every story you tell. At the same time, don't worry if you do. Guess what? You'll have consistency, and your story can stand some repetition.

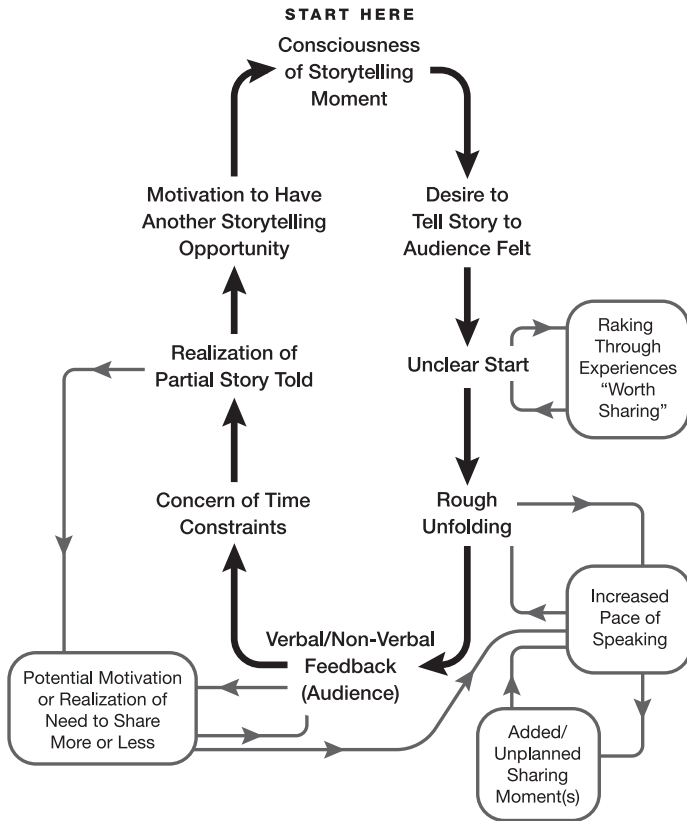
Think about it. If you hear someone's story over and over again, you don't say, "Oh, I've heard that story before." Instead, if somebody uses credentials such as their positions or qualifications over and over again, they become embedded. So, in fact,



repeating lived experiences makes you feel more connected to your own narrative.

## KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING

Take a look at the diagram.



I presented this diagram at an international conference at Oxford University to illustrate the flow of someone attempting to “tell their story.” Pay attention to the “raking through” section and the relationship between the act of “raking through” and being “unclear” at the beginning and how that impacts the unfolding of the person’s attempt to answer the question, “Tell me about yourself.”

It basically shows why people have trouble introducing themselves. I ask students why that is. “You knew that you were going to come here. You knew this class was a leadership development program.”

Then I show them this. And the key part of this is the little circle that says, “Raking through experiences ‘worth sharing.’” If you’ve already vetted your experiences in relation to where you are now, you don’t have to worry when you tell your story. You can almost autopilot (later, we’ll get into how to tell your story in a way that gives you space to tune it while you’re saying it).

You don’t have to struggle and have an unclear start and a rough unfolding. You don’t want to be that person because that person simply stands where they started.

You can just let the story unfold as people react. And then you go to the next dot and then the next dot because you already know your story is ascending. It’s going from hero to collaborative to virtuous.

Those three dots are your PeakStory.

They say, “My value is perfectly aligned with what you, my listener or listeners, are looking for right now. I have value and worth at this moment in time, and you see it clearly. It’s clear to me and to you. Look at me. It all makes sense, right? You want to continue the conversation or learn more about me? Hire me? Accept me into your school, program, or institute? You can see that I’m the person you want.”

That’s your PeakStory.

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## EXERCISE: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Storypathing means looking at events or moments in terms of how they might contribute to our overall story. Don't worry. You already do it automatically. We all do. We just don't put it into words.

You also self-narrate. Self-narration is a language performance that's anchored in truth and creates a value statement. You want to tell your story in such a way that people walk away from you and say, "Wow, that's great. There's someone who really has value."

Again, you already know how to do this. That's why you notice when people give positive reactions to things you post on social media. That's why a like feels good.

What about seeing your own value?

Try going back to your memory feeds, when Facebook or Instagram prompts you and says this was a year ago or this was five years ago. If you're old school, look at an old photo album.

You're trying to start understanding how your brain at a particular moment in the past considered something that might be important to your story.

Try to find one or two photos that really just stand out or strike you from a particular period.

Why did you pick these two? How do these two pictures capture your identity?

Write an analysis of each image in your story journal. Time to unpack more from each picture.

Ask yourself:

- What is it about the pictures that captures your identity? Was it where you were? Was it what you were doing, what you were working on, whom you were with?
- Was it an inflection point in your career, your college experience, your high school days?
- Was it just freewheeling fun at a time when you were usually focused on outcomes? Was it a moment where you could let go? Or was it that you were exploring or creating something new?
- Were you acting as a team, or were you alone?
- Were you taking a risk on yourself, or were you supporting somebody?

Analyzing the images in this way is the first step toward thinking about the moments that will make up your story and how you're going to present them to your listeners.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# PRESENTING YOUR STORY

*“Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy, and mutual valuing.”*

—ROLLO MAY

Presenting your personal story is not as simple a task as it might seem. It needs to bring together your personal identity with your work story, which is a challenge, but the good news is that it will be worth the effort in the end. Once we’re past this stage, you’ll be able to start building your story.

Figuring out what your story is is only part of the process. The other part is telling it effectively. This takes work. Like a good screenwriter putting together an episode, you have to reflect and plan, consider your audience, and bring the pieces together.

Telling your story might look very different to some people than others. No worries. The PeakStory method works for everyone. We’ll help you find the key parts of your story and build them out so you can use them whatever your reasoning for storytelling may be.

## IDENTITY WRANGLING

The good news is that if you are able to launch into *story* versus starting with *let me tell you a story* when someone asks, “Who are you anyway?” the chances are very good that you’re going to hook them.

I call it identity wrangling because identity has always been seen in different ways. At one end of the continuum, people see identity as fixed; at the other end, they see identity as a construct that is constantly unfolding. Although it’s true that everyone has a certain neurology—a certain temperament and certain baseline competencies or ways of thinking—it’s also true that life unfolds and changes things.

Our social identity, or self-identity, is certainly the result of the interaction between the two, between how we’re born and how we change. Sometimes people say, “Well, this is just who I am.”

It’s probably not.

But the great thing is that now it’s you holding the pen, using the keyboard, or shouting through the megaphone. You’re directing your own story. You get to control how much of the story you let out.

So you might say, I was born in a particular way, in a particular place with particular tendencies and motivations. Maybe I needed attention and didn’t get it as a kid. And so I started performing and I became more of an author-entertainer, where I use communication and creativity and leadership. I still need attention today. I still need to be good at something, but I can shift how I do that because I have agency and autonomy.

Looking from your past to the now or near now and then the future, you can start to come up with possibilities for how you'll live, work, and be in that next chapter of your life. Some options you'll see straightaway. Or you may have to put some effort into adding some visualization to your future. You may find many variations are needed to get you to get a sense of this future of yours, rather than a single fixed "next" something. One approach that can be helpful is to iterate many possible options: living in a particular neighborhood or place; recreating differently by hiking or being by the beach; raising horses; or teaching or mentoring for a nonprofit. Write a list of all the possibilities. Bullet them out.

In phenomenology, we call these options *imagined variations*.

Why? Because you'll have to—in some cases—imagine or develop those possible next moments in your life (that's self-authorship for ya!) that you find both plausible and worthwhile. Good news! At this point, you'll have some understanding of what drives you internally, the competencies, people, and places where you'd like to do your work and live your life.

Of course, this is not a social science experiment. This is your life. But the phrase "imagined variations" is helpful because it helps us see what might be. So you have to imagine variations based on the now, near now, near past, and the way past that are likely to continue your plotline so that your story is relevant, prevalent, and sense making.

## **A CASE STUDY**

One of my clients was doing premed at medical school but

decided to switch to an MBA program instead. Today, he's an executive at a pharma company.

When we started sorting his story, he said, "I realized I don't know how I even include that my dad was a doctor. It sounds sort of like I'm kissing other doctors' butts when I say that."

He didn't tell the doctors he met that his father was a doctor because he didn't know what to do with the information. He didn't know how to make it relevant, prevalent, and sense making. How did it make sense within his own story? He'd moved from premed to pharma, but he didn't realize the reasons.

He knew there was some sort of connection between what he did and his family's background in medicine, but he didn't have the tools to process what it might be.

So we worked on the story together and went back over his plotline.

This time, he said, "Okay, now I see that I like the challenge of achieving and producing, which means I like getting things done. As a doctor, that takes a long time. So I like that I can influence medicine through an MBA perspective. Through business, I can still work with people who are like my dad but also have a quicker impact as a leader-producer. And if I could help drugs get to market more quickly, then I was naturally inclined to do that. So my motivation is to connect leadership and organization to my work.

"I know how things work, and I can get things done every day. At the same time, I'm honoring research with clinical trials



and bringing new drugs to market, because that's where my organization and leadership skills can come into play.”

Now that he had made the link in his story, people were like, wow, this guy honors medicine; he grew up in a medical household. And so he could interview and get the job that he wanted in pharma, which was in a startup that made rapid change, rather than the job that would merely pay the bills.

### **THE WRONG SIDE OF THE LAW**

Part of the PeakStory method is to show you how to take parts of your life that don't seem to make sense now and see how they fit into a story that is relevant, prevalent, and sense making.

Take another example. I once had a student who had been in prison. He was a college graduate who had a few cocktails and decided he was going to move a police car. That's not a good idea if you're a black male in a white town in New England.

Really not a good idea.

So this guy wanted to get a job mentoring and helping others, in particular in a college setting.

How was he going to make sense of that in his story?

When we worked through the method, it revealed that he was an explorer but an overactive one. He had no guardrails. So the process helped him say, “Look, my exploration got me into trouble because I didn't understand the rumble strip. That's the warning track that alerts you to the edge of the highway

so you don't drift off. It says, 'You're about to go off the road,' but I didn't understand. So that's exactly what I did."

So this guy came to understand that, and he told his story and he was able to progress. Now he speaks nationally as an advocate for incarcerated folks who are denied certification possibilities, whether it's in physical therapy or healthcare or whatever. He also teaches elements of storypathing in a class called Pivot the Hustle inside the Rhode Island Department of Corrections in coordination with Roger Williams University.

He got that gig in education that he wanted; he's now in front of the class doing the mentoring he wanted to do for others.

By the way, that's the class I used to teach when I met him.

So storypathing both helped him ready himself for public speaking and also allowed him to take stock of his internal narrative and those off-kilter moments where his competencies were knocking him out of balance.

When the thing that pushes you forward also throws you into a ditch, you need to learn how to tune that competency. That's just what he did.

PeakStorytelling has been particularly effective for people who are incarcerated. My colleague James Monteiro, who has received funding from a nonprofit supported by the singer John Legend, started the Reentry Campus Program. It helps individuals who are incarcerated reenter society with educational programs to help them into college and career pathways. James uses the PeakStory method to help

individuals understand their own narrative and their formative experiences—hero, collaborative, and virtuous—so they can have their own PeakStory as opposed to being tempted to borrow someone else’s story for motivation. The PeakStory model helps people come up with their own powerful story, and they get to possess it for life. They can take stock of their own capacity to gain success and engagement in the world.

### **THE DIFFERENCE MAKER**

Whether it’s an executive in pharma or someone in prison, a schoolkid learning English as a second language or a student at Roger Williams, everyone who has gone through the program has found a way to articulate their identity in the real world by way of story.

Even though this is an inside job, it has external consequences.

The great thing is that finding a way to tell your story is not random. It’s the opposite. It’s codifiable. That means we can teach other people how to do it. We can teach *you* how to do it.

And it’s a difference maker.

It’s a difference maker sometimes in getting funding for your nonprofit, getting the promotion you want, getting into the school you want. In the world of stand-up comedy, it’s the difference between getting the front row laughing and getting the entire house laughing. It’s an engagement thing. It shows you reached everyone.

## **INSTANT FEEDBACK**

When you tell your PeakStory, you'll start to understand the feedback loop. Your listener is going to give you immediate feedback.

That's unusual. You're used to not getting feedback because you usually go in and tell a dry story that wakes up negative cognitive scripts. It sounds more or less like everybody else in your workforce or business sector. That means you never get feedback, because no one is going to tell you, "Boy, that's a bit uninteresting. You sound like everybody else."

By individualizing your story, you'll create a signature that is unique. It's your narrative imprint. So you release your story with ease, grace, and honor fueled by the confidence that comes from knowing those authentically identified moments. And those real-life moments come alive as you transfer them from your head to the paper and from doing the work on paper into the ears of others.

## **GROUNDED IN TRUTH**

There are elements of some formative experiences that maybe don't show us in our best light. Not for public consumption, right?

Don't lie about them. Your PeakStory value is grounded in truth. That's why others can't question it and you can have confidence in it. Instead of lying, we can flatten the story. We don't accentuate areas that are not in alignment to the audience or the telling. If you go too heavy in one area, ask yourself whether that content is disruptive to your positive value claim. If you identify a moment that has all the right

juice but also has something that's not so great, maybe don't unpack all of its qualities.

Take my client who moved the police car. Perhaps he might say, "I had a short time out years ago where I kind of went out of balance and I was pushing limits. In fact, I moved someone's car. I didn't want to steal it; I just wanted to mess with them and see how far I could go. Let's just say, it got me into a little bit of trouble because they hadn't really consented." He doesn't have to say that he moved a police car if he's at some national summit in Washington, DC, but he might if he's speaking to incarcerated people. They're different situations.

So we learn when to blow up a blue dot or expand it during our telling, and when to flatten it.

### **FITTING TOGETHER**

Now that you're thinking about blue dots, maybe you're thinking, "Hey, I have this part of my story that I think I want to tell, but I don't know how it even fits."

In my case, that would be figuring out how my BMX bike riding as a kid fits with the fact that I'm now a professor. So my task is to see how that self-event connection is relevant today. Once I understand that myself, when I tell others how it fits, they will accept it.

In this case, my blue dot has to do with creativity, pushing limits, and actually doing the work, jumping the bikes. So then I taught other people how to make the jumps. Now I can see that's why I was a teacher from the time I was a kid. When I tell other people the story, they shrug their shoulders and

turn their palms up and say, “Right, he’s always been a teacher. He even taught other kids how to ride a bike.”

You go back to something that was clearly important, a blue dot, and you join it up to lead toward now or to the near future, to your peak.

Depending on where you are in your life when you investigate your own lived experiences, you’re going to see different things. Because my perspective is based on the lived experience, I’m going to understand all the nuances, but I might carry it forward with a different utility.

To go back to elements of my story, let’s revisit my bike riding. I’m not telling it *now* as it was *then*. Did I say I did it to compete? No. That didn’t enter it. I didn’t need that detail because that’s not what the experience is to me now. At the time, it was about winning trophies. Now it’s about me being a teacher, me being one of the first to do something. The young professor, the young experimenter.

## **FAILURE TO LEARN**

It took decades of teaching people in companies for me to realize that there are some people who don’t actually want to learn. They just want to work their hours, get their paycheck, and get the heck out.

It’s no surprise. Companies and organizations are created as places where we divide people by function. They do that function, and they maybe become a bit automated in their work. They might want to do more, but they’re not even invited to meetings because the meetings aren’t designated for them.

That's just crazy if people want to contribute. As we've seen in the last chapter, up-and-coming generations are motivated by making a contribution more than they are by the paycheck—but companies haven't caught on to this yet.

There is some good learning happening in companies, but for the most part, there's not.

We're still governed by organizing by division and fracture. That's been the model since the fifties and sixties. It's the model today. Perhaps what we learned about remote learning and motivation theory during the COVID pandemic will help change that. We'll see.

But everybody wants self-expression and to make connections. They want relatedness, autonomy, and competence.

And they want to be known as making a meaningful contribution at work. Research tells us employees most often can create an opportunity for meaningful work during the first hundred days in a new position. That's it. After that, their role in the company is set. It's still possible to change, but it takes a whole lot more effort to change how you're seen, to alter your role in the company after those first hundred days.

## **TAKE YOUR TURN**

Many people end up in environments where they're never asked to tell their story or get a chance to ascribe value to themselves. There are no cues telling them, "Now it's your turn."

You don't have to sit back and wait for a formal invitation.

Everyone is wondering about who are you anyway. People you work with. People you meet with. The invitation is always there: “Tell me about yourself.” So if people give you the right to tell your story a little bit, why aren’t you doing it? Don’t tap out; tap in.

I know you’re capable of interpreting your own lived experiences. You don’t need to be a phenomenologist, a psychologist, a social scientist, a PhD, or whatever. Heck, you don’t even need me, once I’ve shown you what to do.

I know that because I’ve seen this work. I’ve seen people identify moments and grapple with them and ask the key questions. They say, “Ah, this is why that thing keeps sticking out to me, but I never really knew.”

But now they know.

That’s what we’re going to discover in the next chapter. I’ve told you about the importance of story and some of the great results people have got from the PeakStory method. Now it’s time to examine the method step by step.

If we were in a race car, this is where we would put on our five-point harness. We’re going to go off-road sometimes, but you’re going to be safe. We’ve got the right vehicle, which is the PeakStory method. You’ve got your notebook ready. This is where we get into the big-time stuff.

Let’s go.



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## EXERCISE: UNPACKING A SYMBOL

In this exercise, I want you to think about your story through symbolic interactionism.

It's an academic phrase for something we all do naturally. We assign meaning to objects that are linked to particular events or times in our lives, like souvenirs from the trip we took or the softball we kept from second grade. We give the objects meaning that is intimately linked to ourselves.

Let's practice.

Look around wherever you're sitting as you read this book. You may be in your den, or in a waiting room, or on public transportation.

Pick the one thing you can see that you would choose if you had to interact with it more than other things. I know it's inanimate. Don't worry, I'm not asking you to make a voice for it or anything. Scan the room for the one thing that could represent who you are and force yourself into that interaction.

It might come naturally. You might need a little coaxing along. Hang in there. Don't give up.

Pick one thing. Is it a fan? Is it a microphone, a watch, a lamp, a picture of a guy holding a fish, some exercise equipment, some Post-it Notes?

A banner or a diploma? A printer in the office? Is it an audio speaker? Is it a glass? Is it a coffee mug? A backpack? A bow tie? A key chain? An old car magazine?

Great. You found it. See how easy that was. Now we're going to up the ante.

Now let your mind travel anywhere outside of where you are physically. Close your eyes and pick one thing that represents who you are, linked to an important part of your life, say between zero and thirteen years of age. (Presumably not from when you were zero.) Choose something that would really tell anyone reading this book about who you are.

In the past, people have chosen footballs, track shoes, a chess or checkers board, a deck of cards. For me, it was my bike because it allowed me freedom. I could get out of my house. I could feel like I was a little bit of an explorer. I could compete and show how I had skills to people who were bigger than me.

You might have several things, but just take one. Go easy on yourself.

Unpack the symbol. Ask yourself why you picked it. What is it? What does it make you think of? What does it represent? Can you think back to a moment in time when it had more relevance, more life connections? When did you first start considering this object in your life? When did you start seeing it? If you took a mental flight back to the past of this object, what would you be looking at? How is that relevant today?

Bang. You've done it. It's that easy because symbols can help you to access moments because we live in a physical world. Stuff, objects, and symbols appeared before words, and they likely help you access meaningful experiences and self-expression from the past.

Write about the symbol in your journal. People sometimes draw the symbol out or describe it, then keep the question and the answers.

We're usually distanced from things that matter. Once we slow down, we can see how they link to events that contributed to our sense of self-identity. There might be something in the moment that's really valuable to your PeakStory.

So great job opening up your brain. Thanks for playing!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**DR. DENNIS REBELO** is a professor, speaker, and career coach. He is the creator of the PeakStorytelling model, his research-based method for crafting the narrative of who you are and what drives you and why, utilized by former professional athletes turned nonprofit leaders as well as entrepreneurs, CEOs, guidance professionals, and advisors throughout the world.

Dr. Rebelo, former president of Alex and Ani University and co-founder of the Sports Mind Institute, received the 2020 Thomas J. Carroll Award for Teaching Excellence at Roger Williams University. He currently resides in Rhode Island.