

Once Upon A Time He Lived Happily Ever After

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Writing or telling lifestyles in short story form has proven to be an effective method of presenting a client's belief system in an interesting, insightful and nonthreatening way.

A client who reads or hears his own story in the third person feels a bit removed from the situation. He is able to view the main character's life from a different vantage point than the one he has always lived with, and he can see his lifestyle decisions with new perspective.

He is able to feel empathy for the hero or heroine (*himself!*) and also new understanding for the other characters in the story. He may find himself realizing for the first time how difficult his siblings' lives were back when they competed with him, whereas before he saw only how unfortunate *he* was in having to compete with *them*.

A reader of fiction is free to accept the characters as the author presents them, without any prejudgement that might cloud his own thinking.

The author has the power to make a fictional character good or bad, strong or weak, but more likely a combination of many traits. The reader tends to see them as the author describes them.

Therein lies the strength of making lifestyles seem fictional. We counselors, as the authors, have permission to "color" the stories in whatever direction we are trying to illustrate. We can make our young heroine amusing, frightened, the doer or the receiver. Our hero can be threatened and cautious, or strong and brave. But throughout, we describe him in an accepting, *encouraging* way, showing his strengths as we go along.

When we point out mistaken beliefs, it is always done with the understanding of how naturally those viewpoints evolved in this person's life, so he can recognize them and accept them in himself as perfectly logical beliefs to have

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had as a *child*. Then there is no need for the client to feel unduly uncomfortable with his belief system or purposive behavior.

However, now that he is no longer a child, he is free to look at the decisions and beliefs through his adult eyes.

In these short stories we make that rethinking process pleasant and non-threatening, but we confront him with his behavior nonetheless. Of course the client is still free to think as the child thought, but we make it easier for him to change by deciding (or by suggesting) with what new productive behavior he could replace his self-defeating behavior.

The formula for the short story follows a sequence of ten points that can be picked up from the client's lifestyle questionnaire, which asks him to describe his family members, early recollections, favorite story, fantasy projections, and so on. (A sample of the lifestyle questionnaire follows this article.)

Here the formula is illustrated with a story written for an actual client and based on his lifestyle. The underlined phrases are quoted directly from Steve's answers on the questionnaire.

Formula for the Short Story

1. "Once upon a time there was . . ." Family constellation.

Once upon a time there was a young couple who had a lot of problems. The man was *violent, insensitive, anxious, disappointed*, and full of *guilt* feelings. The lady was *weak, empathetic, disappointed, abused, dependent*, and *suffering from rheumatoid arthritis*.

2. Client's need to belong, his observation of parents and siblings, and how they seemed to be significant.

When they had their first baby they named him Steve, and little Steve began at a very early age to look around and see what life was all about, and how he could best fit into it. He felt very *insecure* right off the bat, but he wanted more than anything to feel loved and important. When he was *three* years old, his life was complicated further by the arrival of a baby brother, *Tim*.

Then Steve learned to be *independent*, almost a "*loner*." And Tim became Steve's rival, and knew he couldn't compete with his older brother, so he became almost the direct opposite. Tim was *passive, loving, dumb, jealous*, and *dependent*. The more Steve saw of Tim, the harder he worked to become the dominant one. He learned that *if he wanted something he could simply do what he wanted to do, even though he might have to pay a price*.

3. Early recollections illustrate the decisions and beliefs the client was forming about how he could be significant and what life was all about.

When he was just *two*, Steve was allowed to be *catcher in a baseball game* and was *knocked unconscious with a bat*. The physical pain he felt was no worse than the *mortification of "making a mistake,"* which he was beginning to think he must never do. He was already beginning to drive himself to measure up to very high standards.

Down the street was Gus and Andy's fruit stand. When Steve was *three*, Gus and Andy delighted in *showing him a hole in the ground* and saying *there were snakes down there and they'd throw him in if he was bad*. Steve was really *scared* and realized that people who are in a superior position have a lot of power over "lesser" people. He wanted to be one of the superior ones. He was also afraid if he was bad something terrible might happen to him.

4. Childhood favorite story and animal serve as further description of his self-image.

As Steve got older he began reading stories and *loved "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,"* because *the hero could do things other people couldn't*. He *wanted so much to be like that hero*. He also thought how neat it would be to have been a *tiger*, because tigers are *free, strong, powerful, fast, beautiful,* and they *do what they want to do*.

5. In a fantasy projection, the client imagines himself as a child, hiding and listening to two people discussing him. His response to their comments about him is usually a lifestyle statement, summing up very succinctly his belief about his place in life.

Steve knew he was going to have to try hard to achieve the freedom and strength of a tiger, because he didn't feel very good about himself so far. He knew his ears were too big and he felt really ugly, weird, and fat. In fact, if he saw *two girls walking by* and he thought *they were talking about him*, he figured *they'd probably be saying that Steve was really ugly, weird, and fat*, and they'd laugh. He would feel *terrible* and think, *"They're right and I hate'em. But I'll get them back!"*

6. Compliments and criticisms he received when young help define how he sees himself now. The epitaph he envisions on his own tombstone shows how he would *like* to be seen.

Steve's determination was impressive. He became steadily more aggressive and strong. He became a *good athlete* and *smart* besides. People began telling him that *he would BE something when he grew up*. That made him feel terrific and made up for some of the times he was scolded for being obstinate, ill-mannered, discourteous, rude, and a *brat with no self control*. Actually, he had a lot of self-control and was beginning to have control over other people, too.

Generally, the story will not correspond point-by-point to the outline. Early recollections, particularly, may be woven into the story between all the other points of the formula.

One day Steve was *sick in bed* and was rather enjoying *lying there in the sun, listening to the radio play "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window?"* Just then *Mom brought in some soup* for him and he *felt so good* that she cared for him. He felt *warmth* all over and happy just being comfortable and nurtured.

That was a rare feeling for Steve. Mostly he had to be out there in a tough world taking care of himself. His big ears continued to embarrass him and one day *in church* he spotted a *cute girl whom he loved*. He knew she was *looking at him*, but he *wouldn't let himself look at her for fear she'd laugh*. Kids *laughed at him a lot* and called him "Dumbo" and he would feel *remorseful* and *sorry for himself*.

But he worked even harder at being aggressive and dominating. One day when his *Aunt Janey took him for a bus ride* she let him know *she didn't like his old hat*. She suddenly *grabbed it and threw it out the window* and then *she bought him a nice new hat*. But Steve, now *fourteen*, would not be controlled. He was *mad*, and feeling *spiteful* at Aunt Janey, he *threw the new hat out the window*. He'd show her and anyone else that he was the dominant one and not to be controlled.

7. A family motto that might have hung over the fireplace in the client's childhood home suggests the values he either accepted or rebelliously rejected. Mottoes might be, "Do everything perfectly," "Cleanliness is next to godliness," "The family is always right," and so on.

In this case, the client could not recall a family motto, so the story is written without any such reference. An advantage of the short story system is that gaps in the questionnaire answers do not affect the continuity of the lifestyle.

8. Problems of childhood and how they helped inspire the desire to change some of the mistaken beliefs.

But still, sometimes Steve felt guilty. Sometimes he wanted just to be a *good person who tried real hard and didn't hurt anyone*. He would like to have been *more tolerant of people, letting them do things their own way*. But then something would upset him, like his Dad did so often, and Steve would realize again that *Dad wasn't able to do a good job because he was too troubled*. Steve *thought Dad should be removed*. Anyone who couldn't measure up should be removed.

Little by little Steve grew up. He became a very strong person and aggressive and successful. He achieved and showed the world that he could "BE SOMETHING." He became the hero who could always do impressive things that other people couldn't accomplish. He became strong and powerful like a tiger. He was no longer ugly or weird or fat and even his ears didn't stick out anymore.

9. Therapist-author suggests changing the beliefs in helpful ways.

Steve was beginning to wonder about some things. He was beginning to think that maybe he didn't have to "get 'em back" anymore. He even wondered if it was really so terrible to make a mistake. It had been a long time since he'd been hit in the face with a bat and felt so mortified. He was beginning to become more tolerant of other people's mistakes, so could it be that he would allow himself some mistakes too, without feeling mortification?

Might he be able to lie in bed and feel good in the sun, listening to the radio, and let someone bring him some soup and nurture him? That did feel so good!

10. Story ending must be left undecided, of course, since only the client can decide how he will proceed with his life. But it must be positive in its suggested direction, giving the client encouragement in his strength and ability to make good decisions and describing the pleasure and enjoyment he might feel in achieving the changes.

Steve remembered Gus and Andy's fruit stand, and he had to smile at how scared he had been of the hole full of snakes. Now he could pulverize Gus and Andy both with one hand, if he wanted to, but now he knew he didn't have to. They had seemed so superior to him then, but now he could see that they weren't at all, or they wouldn't have acted that way. Aunt Janey wouldn't dare throw his hat out the window anymore. He knew now that if he were in church and spotted the cute girl looking at him, he'd look at her and smile, and she wouldn't laugh at all.

He was beginning to see that he was no longer helpless or weak or vulnerable to superior people. He was as good as anyone in the whole world. He could relax and enjoy life and make mistakes and stop trying so hard, if he wanted to.

What a relief it would be not to have to be dominating anymore, if he chose. The wonderful thing about Steve was that he was so capable of being anything he chose to be. And that anything he wanted to change in his life, he could. He'd proved that. Now he might just like to enjoy life.

What a freeing thought!

The story is read to the client as a catalyst for change, but it's only the starting point for continued discussion, as is any presentation.

Clients usually are delighted at hearing stories written about themselves as the main character. They listen with the same fascination they once did when hearing stories read by their mothers or teachers, and that makes the stories more believable. Furthermore, the "specialness" they experience adds to their feelings of being understood.

The only drawback with this system is admittedly one of time. It is more

time-consuming to write a short story than it is to make a list of a person's beliefs; but the counselor can, of course, use the data in the client's lifestyle questionnaire to make up the story.

With a little practice, the job gets increasingly easier as we, the therapists, think in the suggested order of the short story formula. It sometimes even helps us in clarifying the facts. And we can help our clients "get inside" the heads of all the characters more effectively in a fiction-life setting than we can in presenting logical suggestions.

Moreover, doing lifestyles is *fun*. It's always fascinating, somewhat like working puzzles and seeing the pieces fit together. But writing them as fiction gives us a chance to use our creative juices and adds a new dimension that makes the process even more rewarding.

He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.

— Frederick Nietzsche

Appendix

The Lifestyle Questionnaire

1. Family constellation and values. List six descriptive adjectives for each member of your family as you saw them when you were a child, starting with Dad.
2. Who was most like you? In what ways?
3. Who was most different from you? In what ways?
4. As a small child, how did you go about getting your way?
5. Give at least six early recollections.
6. What was your favorite childhood story, book or fairy tale? What was your favorite part of that story? With whom did you identify?
7. If you were an animal what kind would you choose to be? Why?
8. Pretend you're a child again. Picture a house you lived in when you were small, and find a spot you could "hide" in. Perhaps you had a place where you liked to go off by yourself just to be alone. Not necessarily to hide in, but just to be removed from the world for awhile, to play in, or just to think. Maybe a closet or under the porch, or behind your house or yard where you *could* have hidden away. Maybe up in a tree.

Now close your eyes and picture yourself there as if you were a small child again. No one can see you there. Imagine that two people are walking by, and though they don't know you're there, you can hear them talking. They're talking about you! What two people are you going to imagine? People who were important to you then. What do you hear them saying about you? What does one say, and what does the other say. You, hearing their remarks respond in some way, to yourself, but you say nothing aloud. You just think something in response to their comments. What do you think? And how do you feel?
9. What kinds of compliments did you receive as a child?
10. What kinds of negative things were you told about yourself?

11. We know you're going to live to be at least 100, but when you die what would you like it to say on your tombstone? A phrase that would describe you as you'd *like* to be remembered.
12. Had there been a family motto hanging over your kitchen sink when you were a child, what might it have said?
13. If you could wave a magic wand and change anything or anyone in your childhood, what would you change?
14. With that same magic wand, what would you change about your life now?
15. What problem or problems did you have in your childhood that you still have now?

Life has its own urges and only so much patience with the status quo.

— George Leonard
The Transformation