

Extremely Lousy and Incredibly Closed: Who Would You Be Without Your Story?

Hi Everyone. First of all, I want to thank Jeff and Kate for inviting me to speak again. It's an honor to be here, and I really appreciate it.

Second of all, I should say thank you to author Jonathan Safran Foer, whose book and movie title *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* were the inspiration for the title of my talk today, which is Extremely Lousy and Incredibly Closed, and what I am referring to when I talk about lousy and closed are all the negative, limiting stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. We've all got them, but usually they are so old, we've forgotten they're just a story.

And old stories die hard.

When I was 24, I dated a man named Forrest. He was thirty-two, good looking, a child psychologist, and, unbeknownst to me, a womanizer. It was only after I suggested we date exclusively that he confessed he was engaged to be married. Which wasn't the problem, he said. The problem was that he already had a girlfriend.

Granted, this was shocking. I was angry and heartbroken. But this was not my first relationship. I wasn't some sixteen year-old girl whose life purpose was to go steady or die. I was a graduate student, serious about my career, and very comfortable being alone. So, did I declare myself unworthy, go home to my dog and weep uncontrollably? Did I listen to

Roxy Music for a solid week while consuming nothing but Wheat Thins and Brut champagne until my body rebelled with a kidney infection and a bad cold?

DUHH!!! Yeahh! Because what Forrest had told me was that, while he liked me well enough to sleep with me, I did not rank high enough to merit solo partner status.

And here's why: I wasn't mature enough. I didn't have any self-confidence. I might get my master's degree, but I wasn't smart enough to get a PhD. On a less global note, my wardrobe consisted almost entirely of jeans, my hair was long and unruly, and I drove a Honda. Well-dressed, professional, chisel-faced, BMW-driving men like Forrest didn't want dim-witted, insecure, inadequately-coiffed women at their side; they wanted women who could match their bravado, mind, body and spirit. When I thought about it over my Wheat Thins and champagne, I had to admit I wasn't really shocked at all. I'd known all along I didn't stand a chance with a superhero like Forrest.

It's a sad story, and the thing that makes it sadder is that for years, I believed it. The fact is, I didn't know then and I don't know now what Forrest was thinking. But here's what I do know: everything I told myself about why I was not the sole candidate for his affections—my lack of intellect, my lack of confidence, my appearance problems, my immaturity—EVERYTHING I told myself—was in some way the exact same tale I had told myself countless times before in countless other situations. **IT WAS AN OLD STORY.** It was my outdated

explanation of myself, cobbled together from information handed down by my teachers, parents, siblings and friends—all of whom were struggling with stories of their own.

One day in the lunchroom when I was in the fifth grade, a male classmate blurted out, “What happened to you? You were cute in second grade!” As I recall, I was gnawing heartily on a chicken leg at the time. I could feel the shame rise in my face. I knew *exactly* what he meant: I had gotten chubby. To make matters worse, I had also been fitted with thick glasses, and braces on my teeth. I couldn’t deny the facts, but what would stay with me was the *judgment*: that I was no longer cute. It didn’t take long to go from “not cute” to “unattractive,” and from “unattractive” to “unworthy.” Later, as a teenager, unable to manage the wildfire of self-deprecation racing through me, “unworthy” became “despicable”—and “despicable” became . . . “anorexic.”

Obviously it wasn't this one comment in the school lunchroom at age 10 that made me anorexic at 18. It took this comment and others before and after—some hurtful, some I took as hurtful that weren't intended that way—it took *many* comments to create the story of unworthiness that I would nurture as an adult. Our stories are like kudzu, growing so fast that by the time they have us in their grip, we can't be exactly sure where the initial seed was rooted. The thing is, it doesn't really matter. We don't have to know where our stories began. It's more important to know that, **each time we do not cut them back, we continue to feed them.**

Annie Dillard writes eloquently about how, as children, we grow into consciousness. She compares it to a diver meeting her reflection in a pool. “The diver wraps herself in her reflection wholly, sealing it at the toes, and wears it as she climbs rising from the pool, and ever after.”

This is how I think of our stories. They are the early reflected version of ourselves which we wrap ourselves into completely, and wear forever after. Not until we are much older, or something calls our attention to it—a hospitalization perhaps, a divorce or some well-felt sorrow—not until then might we begin to question the narrow, existing version of ourselves. *It's almost funny, if you think about it: as we mature we outgrow our tiny clothes and get rid of them, but we cleave to our tiny beliefs and **marry** them.*

I recently read a book by Jill Bolte Taylor called *A Stroke of Insight*. Taylor was a neuroscientist when at age 37, she suffered a stroke. She was at home alone in her apartment the morning it happened. She was barely able to call a colleague for help before she lost her understanding of what a telephone was and how to use it. Writing about it many years later, Taylor says that, by virtue of her training, she was able to watch, from the inside, the gradual shut-down of her cognitive abilities. She likened it to the incremental darkening of a city grid losing its power section by section.

The resulting silence, she says, was astounding. She goes on to say that whether or not we are aware of it, we are constantly chattering to ourselves—about what we need to do, how we feel and why we feel that way, what we like and dislike—the narrative is endless. This chatter—these stories—are a function of our left brain’s language center. They are the connective tissue that keeps us attached to who we know ourselves to be in the world.

Interestingly, Taylor adds, whether or not we have all the facts is not of concern to the left brain. As it turns out, the left brain is quite adept at filling in the gaps in our knowledge all by itself, with smooth surmising, inventions of probable cause, and downright fabrications.

The absence of this chatter in the wake of her stroke—the complete disappearance of the running dialogue that narrated her life—was a silence, she says, that was a “magnificent gift.”

“Now that my left mind’s language centers and story-teller are back to functioning normally,” she writes, “I find my mind not only spins a wild tale but has a tendency to hook into negative patterns of thought. If I want to retain my inner peace, I must be willing to consistently—and persistently—tend the garden of my mind moment by moment, and be willing to make the decision a thousand times a day.”

The “magnificent gift” of silence Taylor talks about puts me in mind of those fragile, practically pre-conscious moments just after waking when who I am exactly hasn’t quite filtered back down to me after sleep. It is in those moments that I have been most filled with a boundless optimism and an unfettered belief in my own creativity. Not yet beset by limiting thoughts, my brain not quite hooked back into what I believe to be true about myself, I feel utterly free and completely *possible*.

This is who I am without my story.

One of my favorite writers of all time is David Foster Wallace. Recently I was reading about a character named Gately in his novel, *Infinite Jest*. Gately, it seems, has been shot in the shoulder and is lying in his hospital bed, going over his life. Because he has refused morphine, he is in considerable agony. About Gately's suffering, Wallace wrote, "...everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news." (read again?)

When my pre-conscious waking state begins to fade, and I lose the freedom from story, what is the unendurable news my brain returns with from its recon mission? It is the tale of my extremely lousy & incredibly closed self: the tired and despairing myth, five decades old, of my incapability and unworthiness.

A few years ago, I was getting ready to take the licensing exam to be a school psychologist. I was terrified. My story--I'm not smart enough, I'm not mature enough--started up like a faithful engine. I told a few people I was getting ready to sit for licensure, and waited for their response.

“You? But you’re an idiot,” I expected them to say. When nobody said this, when my announcement was met with enthusiasm and support, I was amazed. *How to explain this mystery?* I decided that one of two things was at play: Either people were being polite, or they didn’t know me.

“But wait,” I wanted to say. “You don’t understand. I’m an idiot. Really I am, please believe me!”

I was like John Krasinski’s character at the end of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, when he’s literally shaking with frustration and screaming, “Judge me!” **WHAT** the **hell** is that?

For whatever reason it’s not enough that we have our sorry, outmoded stories. It’s not enough that something we heard in 5th grade about our worth or capacity as a human being continues to define who we are 10, 20, 50 years later--we want other people to define us that way, too.

Because this is how we know ourselves, and the alternative—challenging the story, discovering someone else inside you—well, this is hard work. And if your story is about what a failure you are, or how nothing ever works out for you, or how lazy you are-- then how much harder that makes it to DO the work.

Well, between studying to be a life coach, reading Byron Katie and Eckhart Tolle, and working with my therapist, I've finally started to *get* it. (*It's true what they say, it really does take a village!*) My story is an entity separate from me, and true only because I believe it. Eckhart Tolle tells a story in *The Power of Now* about his moment of spiritual transformation. He had just graduated from the University of London, had no plans for his future, and was growing more and more depressed, until one day he woke up and decided *he simply could not couldn't live with himself a minute longer*. At which point he had the following revelation: "If I can't live with myself, there must be two of me: the 'I' and the 'self' that 'I' cannot live with. Maybe only one of them is real."

If I ask myself which version of *me* is the more real--the created self who is immature, stupid, and runway challenged, or the “I” who is open enough to asking which is real, something amazing happens. Just by virtue of *asking*, a sliver of space that wasn’t there before opens up between my story and me. And ..I... realize that my story and I are like Velcro—we are two separate and distinct entities that are stuck tightly together, but that, with effort and attention, can be pulled apart. If I then go on to ask, “Who would I be without this story,” an even bigger space opens up. This is the space that allows me to see I have a choice in the matter. I can continue to believe in my failings, or I can come to a **curious**, and **creative** and **profound** place about who I *really* am, and live my life from there.

As I mentioned, I just finished Life Coach training classes. For the most part I enjoyed the trainings, they were informative and fun and very experiential. But there were moments when I felt my old, incompetent self move in with renewed vigor. One of the triggers was my belief that another woman in my class thought I was completely **in**competent. She was a young woman with a gift for coaching that bubbled up from some deep, innately brilliant part of her, and each time I was paired with her—and I seemed to get paired with her a lot—I felt the air go out of me a little. I liked her very much—she was spunky, a funky dresser, and quite clever. She was also pretty and smart—all the things I wanted to be, but my story had for years told me I was not. No wonder that, in her presence, the story of my ineptitude flared.

By the end of training, I was exhausted from fighting my own negative self-talk. At one point, I even got sick for an entire week. On the final day of training, as we were gathering our belongings and saying our goodbyes, the woman approached and hugged me.

“Too bad about that brain of yours,” is what I half-expected her to say. Or “Too bad that at 50 you have the resume and maturity of a ten year-old.”

But that's not what she said. What she said floored me. She said, "You are my role model. You've done so much—had a mental health career, an art career, a writing career. . . I hope to one day be as accomplished as you are." And in that moment, my unendurable truths fell away. A sliver of light patched through between my narrative and me, and an entirely different story was illuminated.

In his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, writer David Foster Wallace spoke about tending the garden of the mind. He said, "True freedom means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to, and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed."

We are each the steward of our own mind, and it is up to us to guard the grounds. How easy it is to bow down to every unconstructive, every negative and self-limiting thought that bubbles up from the unconscious place within us. How easy it is to revere our limitations, while our creativity, our possibility, our immeasurable worth lie motionless within.

David Foster Wallace committed suicide in 2008. Perhaps it's unwise to take advice from a man who took his own life. And then again, perhaps this is exactly who we should be listening to.

One more self-revelation. I had one story that was as big as my unworthiness story and whose root system was just as complicated. It hewed so close to the bone, and challenging it was so frightening, that I had decided just to live with it. It is said that we are presented with **hundreds** of opportunities every day to see and do things differently, if we'll only pay attention. My opportune moment came a few years ago, when I realized my story was inhibiting my growth and I wanted to grow more than I wanted to simply avoid facing my fear. Almost immediately, my story began to dissolve. That was the story about how I would never, ever. . . under any circumstances. . . in a million years. . . so help me God—

be a public speaker. END OF STORY!

Thank you!