

Personal Narrative – July 2017

Work Is A Story We Tell Ourselves
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“She's just another woman pushing guacamole around on her plate in an infinity symbol,” I reassured myself. This thought personifies the authority from our licensing agency on the other end of the phone and quiets the intimidation factor.

I imagine that the requirement newly issued by her agency has delivered her a handful of calls just like the one I made to her today. I speculate about all the things she, too, must be juggling. I imagine both of us on opposite sides of some invisible wall of professionalism. Like a catholic at confession, I want to rip the screen from the booth and call the priest out into the light and ask him, “Can you just be a person, and can I just be a person, and can we both just talk about what I did?”

I'm not good at boundaries.

It's always too much or too little, an over-share or under-share, like a memo about the nuances of social dynamics circulated right before I was born.

What type of personality does it take to hit the mark?

So, I mostly pretend that I actually got that memo and that I'm on board, confer with my colleagues, that we are all on the same page and all, which has worked pretty well so far.

When I started as an executive assistant, I had to position myself, in my own mind, as more of a partner with my boss, even though I wasn't, in order to muster the courage to make the independent decisions she asked of me. As a small business owner, she did not have time to walk me through every evaluative step of every process and she needed someone to challenge her decisions, not pacify them. I could not even access that part of my personality without pretending that I shared her weight and responsibility. Before I could answer the question, what should “we” do, I honestly had to ask, for every question, what would “I” do. I discovered a lot about what “I” would do.

I am high information. From my perspective, the more feedback I give, the more helpful I can be. Often I find myself fading out of a long string of words that bounce off blank eyes looking back at me: “I'm sorry, I think I over-talked that point,” a common conversation conclusion.

I am a problem solver. While I believe it makes the lives of others easier, people often misread my intended helpfulness as micromanaging or as doubting their capacity to generate a solution. The truth is, the tentacles of an unresolved issue inflame my mental stability and I become driven to tie them neatly in a bow or sometimes just shear them off completely.

I am an anticipator. I use the volume of information I've collected to solve problems that are in the distant future. I amaze myself at times just how far into the future I am solving problems for myself and those around me. Even as the trajectory changes I am spending more energy on more analysis of potential outcomes.

When our licensing agency issued a new background check requirement, they advised us to make it the employees' responsibility to complete the new requirements. Instead, I wanted to be able to produce, on demand, a five-section bulleted document with exact instructions, so I called the local police department and inquired about the details of the process.

"I have several employees that need a fingerprint card for new requirements by our licensing agency—"

"We don't do that here, you need to call the county."

"Oh, okay. Thank you, I'm glad I called, do you have their number handy?"

"Hello, I have several employees that need a fingerprint card for new requirements by our licensing agency—"

"Let me transfer you to Megan."

Megan? Officer Megan? Megan must be important. I should write down Megan's name, Megan at the county sheriff's department. This will be a good contact since this new requirement is obviously going to continue to impact my responsibilities.

"County Sheriff's Department."

"Hi, there, is this Megan? I am calling because I have several employees that need a fingerprint card for new requirements by our licensing agency."

"Okay."

"Um, well, I just don't want to waste my employees' time –or yours– so I wanted to ask about what they need to do, where they need to go, a cost?"

"It's \$5.00 per person. They just need to come here and ask for a card."

"I believe it's called an 'applicant card' is that correct?"

"Yes, just a card. A fingerprint card."

"Okay and where, exactly, are you located?"

"It's...we're at the jail. Off the main highway? 5500 Whitmire Road. We're here...Monday through Friday...9:00 to 5:00...we go to lunch around 11:00 or 12:00."

I now detected that my eagerness to uncover the details had made Morgan speculate on my

intelligence and comprehension levels, but I pressed on.

“Okay, thank you for that information. So, they will just go and ask for a fingerprint card to be fingerprinted for their employer.”

“They just need to ask for a card. Don’t say anything about employment. If you make it too complicated, our receptionist won’t help you.”

I couldn’t stifle a laugh at this point. I realized, suddenly, Megan is not the one with the power. Now, *the receptionist* is with whom I need to be in contact.

I hung up the phone vowing to model the rest of my working days after the receptionist. What confidence and prowess it must take to not only make this declaration, but to live in a way that others actually take care to note this about you as a warning that should be heeded.

What assertion! I began to get lost dreaming about how simple my life was going to be from here on out – a definitive, zero tolerance policy on complicated matters! I have a threshold, and you’ve met it!

Suddenly, my emboldened luster was doused as my anticipatory nature began to wander down the spectrum of assertiveness.

Doubt is a natural successor of determined resolve.

I was reminded of a scraggly drawn cartoon that used to be posted in the Social Security office that my father managed. Push pinned to the cubicle wall or corked on a bulletin board or taped to the dry erase board in the break room, there was always at least one. A portrait of an older, heavy-set comic book woman whose hand drawn lines were as haphazard as the wrinkles in her dress, rivaled only by the wrinkles in her skin. Behind her thick glasses was a grumpy, furrowed brow and eyes that had long lost their ability to connect with human ingenuity. In thick, black letters framing her essence of frown, it always read:

“I can only please so many people a day and **TODAY’S NOT YOUR DAY.**”

As a ten-year-old on spring break, signing out candy bars in my father’s name from the break room, I was most discouraged by not only this woman’s clear lack of emotional management but most of all by this threshold of people-pleasing, this idea that one can max out and, as a result, others suffer.

I always tried to imagine the person the sentiment of this sign fell upon. Whose plight is unluckier, the frazzled, ticking time bomb subordinate or the customer that unsuspectingly put her over the edge?

What of the customer’s thresholds for being cast aside or ignored or shut down?

The stark contrast of my reaction to the two perspectives suddenly made the lesson very clear: What was the difference between the off-putting cartoon and my new hero, the receptionist?

Was I now in danger of becoming the scraggly hand drawn cartoon?

Do not push pin me to the cubicle!

Do not tape me to the dry erase board!

All for a few laughs while justifying an extended break by five minutes because you do work so damn hard...

No, this is the new age. Just keep it simple; that is the message.

It's a difference in having a threshold of people and having a threshold of person.

I don't have to be frumpy, furrowed, and forlorn by my plight. It's a simple boundary that I set, which resets with positivity and optimism for each new customer – the receptionist's and mine are hopeful declarations.

May we all strive toward greater simplicity and draw our boundaries for ourselves, with ourselves, to optimize the time we give. You can just be you, partner or not, problem with authority or not, you can be empowered not by the story you tell yourself about your abilities but by the stories others tell about you because they know you, they've seen you - the real you - with all of your many shortcomings. They've learned to live with you and appreciate you and your strictly drawn boundary for complication.

The crazy cartoon lady overextended herself by hiding her lack of patience and efficacy and retreated to reclusion once the façade wore thin. The receptionist applies a consistent, authentic boundary that is objective and needs only to be enforced. In our working lives we tell ourselves stories about what we are capable of, what we can contribute, what we can face, and what we can build.

Tell yourself a story, that's fine; just make it one that is true.