



Episode 31: Once Upon a Time...

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's talk about how to think creatively about your life, who you are, and what you want. Let's give your brain a tool to think in a new way, to allow for new insights, new awareness, and new ideas.

First, I want to tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a leader who was stepping into her power. She decided that she was at a stage in her life and career where she was ready. Ready to let go of past fears. Ready to start owning her accomplishments, speaking up more, and claiming her purpose. She knew there might be setbacks in her personal journey, and so she put her shoulders back, took a deep breath, and committed to moving forward. She lined up her allies, clarified her talking points, and felt the power of the universe at her back.

Let me pause there. Are you curious? Do you want to know what she then does?

I'm guessing you said yes, and that's because our brains love stories. Our brains hear the words "once upon a time" and they immediately settle in, get curious, and want to hear about the characters, the challenges they're facing, and how they prevail.

Here's the cool thing – remember when I said a few moments ago that I was going to share a tool to help you think creatively about your life? Well, the tool is a once upon a time story.

Stories are how we make sense of life. The way we tell a story and the words we choose form a framework for a listener to see something through a certain lens.

In addition to being fun to read and listen to, once upon a time stories can be another tool for your leadership toolkit. They can help you with visioning, clarifying direction, and thinking more creatively.

That's because these stories allow the brain to think in a new way. Most of the time, our brain falls into familiar thinking patterns. We think about our life and its challenges in the same way. We are creatures of habit and habitual thinking.

Although your habitual thinking likely often serves you, there's always an opportunity to bring more creativity and a new approach. After all, that's what shakes us from our complacency and opens up our eyes to other approaches and different potential outcomes.

The once upon a time story tool can help focus your thoughts to what you really want, what you might unconsciously know, and the truth of the situation.

Take a moment now and ask yourself where your thinking might feel stuck. Ask, where do I want to think more productively? About a challenge at work? About life? About a relationship?

Let's bring this story tool to whatever it is you're thinking about so that you can create a more powerful framework for the situation and give your brain direction about how and what to think.

Let's talk through how to use once upon a time as a thinking tool.

The first step is creating a powerful first sentence. This sentence will focus your brain's thinking toward the energy, feeling, and outcome you want.

After the words once upon a time, you get to choose what comes next. This will depend on what you want. What are we talking about? Do you want to feel empowered? Do you want to make a big decision?

Choose a first sentence that reflects what you want and how you want to see yourself.

Here are a few examples.

Once upon a time, there was a leader who decided to set boundaries.

Once upon a time, there was a woman who used her voice to speak up.

Once upon a time, there was a person who was ready to have a bigger impact in the world.

This first sentence creates possibility and potential, so please give yourself permission to try a few phrases to see which one resonates and evokes curiosity in your brain.

Step 1 is crafting your first sentence.

Step 2 is writing the story. Give yourself permission to let it flow through you onto paper. I'm a big fan of writing by hand, because this stimulates more creative thinking.

Remember to write your story in the third person. Writing in the 3rd person is an interesting phenomenon. On one hand, your brain has an inkling this story is about you, although the fact that it's in the 3rd person keeps the story in the land of make believe.

As you write, let go of perfection and let your brain explore the fullness of the situation. Imagine what the person is feeling, thinking, saying, and doing. What's possible?

After you write for about 10 to 15 minutes, move on to Step #3. Step 3 is reading your story out loud. Now, there's a specific way you're going to do this. You're going to read it out loud 2 times. First, read it out loud the way it's written, in the 3rd person. Make sure to read it slowly and deliberately. You might even read it twice, to really let the words land.

After you do that, you're going to read the story out loud again, this time mentally switching from the 3rd person to the first person.

Here's what I mean. Remember the story I shared at the beginning of this podcast? I chose that sentence stem thinking about my life.

If I were switching it to the first person, here's how I would read it.

Once upon a time, I was a leader who was stepping into my power. I decided that I was at a stage in my life and career where I was ready. Ready to let go of past fears. Ready to start owning my accomplishments, speaking up more, and claiming my purpose. I knew there might be setbacks in my personal journey, and so I put my shoulders back, took a deep breath, and committed to moving forward. I lined up my allies, clarified my talking points, and felt the power of the universe at my back.

When I read it like this, I feel excited and energized. And as a cognitive tool, it also points my brain toward productive thinking. It invites my brain to think more about the opportunities and partnerships I want to pursue.

Creativity expands our thinking, which influences what we are able to say and do next.

Let's bring this to you.

In the next few days, I invite you to write your own once upon a time story.

Find a quiet place to sit, have a paper and pen ready, and then choose a first sentence. For example, once upon a time there was a person who knew where they wanted to take a stand.

Then, writing in the 3rd person, let your story emerge.

After you're done, read it out loud as is. Then read it out loud again in the first person to see how that feels.

See how this creative exercise might shift your thinking about what's possible.

You can even try this with someone you're coaching or a team you're working with. If you're doing it with a group, I suggest having everyone use the same initial sentence to create their story, and then have the people share their stories with each other. See what's similar and different and how it gives insight about what's needed next for the team.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. I want to hear your story. Please email me at deb@debelbaum.com and share it with me. And if you need help, email me for a conversation. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!