

This is a Paper on '*Fractured Narrative*' that I delivered last year to over 100 ranking executives in Defense and Law Enforcement at a seminar on PTSD at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey. 'Fractured Narrative' was determined to be a form of PTSD and we all realized that you do not need a war to have it and it is a much more widespread problem than they had thought. Storytelling was also added as one of the treatment protocols.

It is a pleasure to be speaking to you yet again – this time about “Fractured Narrative.” I am hoping that this short presentation will become the basis for a book about healing this condition – sort of ‘Heal Your Story; Heal Your Life,’ which will include a number of case studies and interviews. Significantly, it will not be a book for writers, although I would expect that some writers will read it, but rather a book about improving one’s life through storytelling.

Fractured Narrative is my term for a condition common in those who have difficulty telling stories because their own stories have been broken by trauma – usually but not always during childhood – divorce, abuse, incest, war, the death of a parent, etc.

The inability to tell one’s own story – and stories in general – is more serious than you might think. It does not only mean that you cannot make a living as a storyteller; it means that you do not know where you are in your own story; you do not know where you have been or where you are going or where you want to go. You are adrift and living from day to day without a plan.

The following quote is from Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*:

These insistent scenarios had a repetitive and borderline-brutal quality that reminded me of the wound-up Wall Street husband of one of Hobie’s clients who, when he got in a certain mood, liked to tell the same three stories of his Vietnam war experience over and over with the same mechanical wording and gestures: same rat-a-tat of gunfire, same chopping hand, always in the exact same spot. Everyone’s face got very still over the after-dinner drinks when he spied off into his routine, which we’d all seen a million times and which (like my own ruthless loop of searching for my mother, night after night, year after year, dream after dream) was rigid and invariable. He was always going to stumble and fall over the same tree root; he would never make it to his friend Gage in time, just as I would never manage to find my mother. But that night, finally, I did find her.

The whole book is about fractured narrative. When he is a very young boy, Theo’s mother is killed in an explosion at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. That is the fracture, an event over which he had no control, which completely changed his life. The explosion and death of his mother so overwhelmed his system that he could not track things causally. His homunculus shut down and the event became a series of irreconcilable,

unprocessed images. He survives and lives in a prison of repetitive, destructive behavior until he puts his narrative and his life back together.

I had fractured narrative. This paper is based on my own experience learning how to heal myself, teaching screenwriting on the graduate faculties of the American Film Institute and the University of Southern California for fifteen years and teaching in Afghanistan and Lebanon, where because of war and strife, this condition is endemic.

When I was 38, six years after my first film, *Pumping Iron*, loosed Arnold upon the world, I made a feature documentary called *Stripper* that Hollywood loved, which incidentally does not mean that it was good, but it brought me to Hollywood as a feature film director for hire. In the entertainment industry, when you have an idea, you go in and pitch it to the head of a studio, and if they like it, they hire a writer and develop the script. I had a lot of ideas and opportunities, but when I got in the room I was faced with the inevitable question: what's the story? I had great difficulty answering that question, and this was not the first time. When I was a child, I was slow to learn how to read and when I did, I read very slowly and would escape into the worlds where the words took me. I was so absorbed in the details that I could not tell you what had happened after I had finished a book. Many times I would see film versions of books that I had read and think, "Oh, that was what happened." There was no part of my mind that could step back and look at the story from 50,000 feet and say what happened.

And so it was with my life. I had wandered from opportunity to opportunity, a predator and a grazer as it were, without any real plan. I had some success and many opportunities but my inability to tell stories and know and understand my own would ultimately sabotage me and be the catalyst for a serious reckoning as to why and how this happened. Also, in great part to heal myself, I became attracted to writing and began to study the mysteries of narrative.

Stories have beats. When something happens, that is a beat. This leads to this and that leads to that, etc., etc. In good stories, there is unmistakable causality. Things don't just happen; they happen because something else happened that causes something else to happen. I began tracking the beats of stories. After I saw a film, I would make myself write down what happened

from memory. At first I got only about thirty beats but soon I was getting sixty or seventy which are the number of beats that most films have. This is a very important exercise because it shows causality and the relation of one event to another, and it also brings your attention into the present. To do this, you must dwell in the “Here and Now” and not wander off into some personal dream.

I also began studying the narrative gods: Lajos Egri’s *Art of Dramatic Writing*; McKee’s book *Story*, which is about classic three act structure; and Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* which takes the work of Joseph Campbell in comparative mythology and applies the journey of the hero to narrative. I learned a lot about what most stories have in common: an *ordinary world* before the story begins; an *inciting incident*; a *premise*, which is what the story is really saying, i.e. its values; a *First Act break*, where the hero is irrevocably committed; *raising stakes* and *mounting action* – the list goes on.

I began to apply storytelling mechanics to my own story and I realized that the reason that I could not tell stories was that my story had been broken. There was a moment with no causality. Something just irrationally happened over which I had no understanding or control. I remember the moment. I was eight years old. My mother told me she was divorcing my father and the world as I knew it was no longer and life fractured into a series of irreconciled images. My parents divorced and moved away, and I was sent away to boarding school. Prior to that I was floating effortlessly, unconsciously down the river of life. Then all of a sudden, I was jerked out of the river and sitting on the shore, alone, watching life pass by. That was my fracture and it created a wound for which I compensated by creating a mask. Life goes on; it must; what do you do to go on? In my case, the mask was creating constant distractions and things to do; there were always several enticing options to attract others and distract me from what I really wanted to do, which was to go back to my family and my life as it was and that wasn’t possible anymore. At that time I also started lying. It was compensatory. My story was broken so I made up other stories about myself to make me seem like a cool guy with a great family. They were frequently ridiculous: my uncle was Roy Rogers and I knew Karate and Judo, stuff like that. I also became an adept petty thief. That was also compensatory. If I could not tell the story of who I was and where I was from and where I was going and be proud of it, then at least I could have a lot of stuff.

I was in my late thirties when I realized all this. Then with a lot of help from some very smart producers, I wrote a script about a man-eating tiger on the loose in LA and sold it for over a million dollars. As you can imagine, this was not literature, but it did launch my screenwriting career, which began with selling a number of 'spec' scripts.

This led to two things: an opportunity to teach screenwriting at the graduate level at the AFI and USC, and a need to tell my own story. I realized that this wound could be a gift and the great story that I had to tell was the story that broke my own: my parents' divorce, being sent away to boarding school and being trapped and, in my own mind, abandoned. And then the worst possible thing that could have ever happened turned out to be the best. The end of one life was the beginning of another. One brilliant early spring day, a helicopter flew into my boarding school and aboard was my mother with her new boyfriend who was a fantastic guy. And he was rich. This was 1958 when everyone pretty much agreed that it was desirable to be rich. He was also a great athlete and to an eight year old, that was also highly desirable. A few months later, he became my stepfather and it ushered in a whole new life in which I was sort of a prince.

The novellas and scripts that I wrote on my life were my best writing and although they were not deemed commercial, they attracted major actors and came close to getting made and/or published several times. I also lied much less. The compulsion was gone and I told stories not to aggrandize myself but for entertainment. I also got married and had a son and they are the loves of my life. I am by no means perfect, but I am improved. Learning to tell stories and telling my story healed me.

The work I did on my own story made me a much better writer and teacher. By now, I was making a good living writing and teaching became a major part of my life. Typically I had at least one and sometimes two sections of 8-12 Masters screenwriting students each year. Over the thirteen-year period that I was at the AFI, I taught over 150 students on a fairly intimate basis. Apart from the pedagogy, the fun was in getting to know them and help them determine the stories they needed to tell.

During my first years as a teacher I was very much an elitist. I was proud of the many students that I had taught that were having successful careers. Once at a conference I was in the middle of bragging about it when another professor said that he was teaching people that would never sell a script.

That became a turning point for me. I realized that screenwriting was really just storytelling with a weird format and that many people were drawn to it more to heal themselves than to make a living. I became much more interested in teaching as a healing tool. I began to recognize fractured narrative in some of my students. About a quarter of my American students had it in some form.

Beginning in 2006, I went into a flurry of documentary production all over the world and became too busy to teach on a conventional week-to-week basis. I did, however, lead teaching intensives in Afghanistan in 2006-08 in which I organized a filmmaking curriculum and took teams of 10 teachers there for two-week intensives in each of the three years. We taught all the television personnel in Kandahar and ultimately gave certificates to 120 students. The idea was to teach them to tell their own stories rather than cramming our media down their throats.

I also taught a number of storytelling intensives in Lebanon in 2013 and 2014 and in the spring of 2014, I taught a screenwriting class for 25 Masters students here at the Université de Saint Esprit de Kaslik. I have found that because of the trauma and conflict in Lebanon and Afghanistan about 80% of the people I have taught have fractured narrative. In cultures like this, teaching storytelling can save people's lives. Suddenly they have a plan; they become more resilient and life becomes about more than surviving.

I am going to touch on three other rather archetypal examples of people that I have taught who had fractured narrative. I will address their 'masks' first as that is the first thing that we see. I apologize in advance for the remedial nature of my character analysis but I am not a psychologist and I view this from the perspective of being a writing teacher. Then I will talk about the symptoms in their writing, and finally the cure and how it affected them. The cure always involves restoring causality and linear storytelling and telling the story that broke their narrative.

The first is a woman that I shall call Abi. Abi was very sensitive, gentle and angelic-looking. Life was always happy and she loved her boyfriend and everything was a fairy tale *vivant*. Abi was an American, a student, and a poet. Not surprisingly, many whom I have taught that have fractured narrative are poets – often award winning poets. Indeed, unless you are writing narrative poetry, poetry is a form of institutionalized fractured narrative.

Surprisingly, Abi was drawn to commercial and unredeemed blockbuster action films. When I began reading her first script, I noticed that she would set up a big action sequence – cops about to break into a drug dealer’s apartment and make a big bust – and then she’d cut to the next day and skip the action. She repeatedly avoided the cathartic action, which is the lifeblood of the form.

I met with her and after some prodding, she told me the most incredible story of her life as a child growing up with a psychotic, abusive, homeless, and alcoholic mother. They wandered around living off the kindness of relatives until they were thrown out and then they would find another relative. Her mother was violent and extremely possessive of her beautiful daughter. Relatives and teachers tried to help her but her mother made it impossible for her to get away and have any kind of a life. Abi struggled to get away from her mother whom she had very complex feelings about – love, pity, gratitude, shame, hatred, and the fear that she might be similarly afflicted. Above all, she wanted to get an education, so she surreptitiously applied to colleges with the help of a relative. She got into a top university on a full scholarship and ran away only to have her mother follow her there. And the story goes on and on. I told her that she had to write this story, for others and for herself. Finally, after a lot of encouragement, she did so in her second year and it turned into an absolutely terrific script. It has been optioned several times and I am certain that it will ultimately be a very good film.

In summary, a young woman is striving to lead a pleasant and pretty life in order to mask a painful childhood. So, she wrote the story and is now on the staff of a major television series. She has become much less fragile and more self-confident and gregarious. She is married to her boyfriend and is ‘considering’ children.

The second person is Rich, the ‘Achiever’ and ‘Action Junkie.’ Rich always needed to be distracted, and consummately focused by the adrenaline that most probably approximated the stress that fractured his story. His measure of success was how much he got done. He was very charming, a fast talker, a great seducer and salesman. He had a tendency to drug and alcohol abuse. He wrote comedy – broad and not very well plotted comedy - but lots of gags. On the very rare occasion when he slowed down, usually when he had a hangover, he began to exhibit bi-polar tendencies and a couple of times he

began to go into the details of his family life – both parents were shrinks in Baltimore and there was violence all over the place, especially against his baby brother. He had considerable guilt about not doing anything about it. He felt that he had just escaped, which he continued to do in his life. Writing comedy was an escape for him as well but he really needed to take the time to make his comedy about something – there needed to be a plot.

I do a serial storytelling exercise regularly with my classes, which seems remedial but it is very effective. It was especially so with Rich. It starts with someone saying an opening to a story, like: “I got up this morning and ...” The next person repeats that and continues with the next ‘beat.’ The third person repeats the first two beats and says a third...and on and on. We go around in a circle. It is amazing how this trains the memory and puts causality into the students’ ‘hard drive.’ It also brings their attention entirely into the *Here and Now*. You cannot do this exercise if there are lapses in attention. Students get really good at this and the stories can be wildly inventive and funny. The record without a mistake was fifty-three beats but it was not unusual to get over thirty.

I also made Rich see all the great comedies and do beat sheets after he had seen them and he learned that even in the broad, stupid comedies, there was a *premise* under all the jokes, which is to say that there was an important message. And then we focused on what he really wanted to do with his life and to say with his writing. And he wanted more than anything to help people in a way that he failed to help his brother.

At the end of his first year, he called me and he was very upset and wanted to get together. We met and he said that he had gotten into medical school and he didn’t know what to do. And there was no question in my mind that that was what he should do. In a few years he became a successful ER doctor. In a sense this is succumbing to or accommodating the wound: the reason that he is so good in the ER is that things are coming at him all the time that he has to deal with. He has become the action junky incarnate. He’d still like to write and he still may some day.

The third person is Marc who keeps himself busy by helping others and making himself indispensable. This type is very common in war torn countries. He is Lebanese and in his late twenties. He is a talented filmmaker but spends all his time running a video and technology store. He is constantly absorbed by the endless details of the store: copying pirated

videos and selling them, selling tech gadgetry and instructing customers on how to use them and generally helping anyone and everyone out. When I probed, I learned that he lost his father when he was very young and spent most of his childhood and adolescence in his bedroom watching films. His films are not personal at all but ponder large questions like God and the nature of the Universe. An angry Old Testament God speaks endlessly in voice over in his films.

Marc will do almost anything to avoid dealing with his anger, grief, sadness and loneliness. He affects emotions and has real trouble with any kind of real human, authentic interaction. It is all deeply buried. He is frozen in the moment of his father's death.

The cure for Marc was tricky because telling the story of his father's death was too painful at first. We started with beat sheets and serial storytelling and then I had him talk about his favorite films and why he liked them. He would talk about all kinds of banalities like the images and the cinematography and the actors but when we really got down to what the movie was saying, he realized that although he had been unaware of it before, the message was extremely important to him. We also did this with songs and oddly, he was a huge fan of Broadway musicals and he knew many songs by heart. Among his favorites was one from a sixties musical called *No Strings* and some of the lyrics were:

“The Sweetest Sounds I've ever heard are still inside my head.
The Sweetest sounds I've ever heard are waiting to be said.”

And I asked him if he believed that. And he was completely shocked. It had never occurred to him that the lyrics were so important to him. He thought he just liked the melody. And so the question became what are you going to do about it? How can you get the sounds outside your head?

The telling of his story became about avenging his father's death, not with violence but in living his life in a way that honored his father and justified the sacrifices he had made.

Now a year later he has written a powerful script that is getting produced in Lebanon and is set against the backdrop of its civil war. He also, incidentally, was able to buy the video store where he worked and he just recently sold it for a good profit.

Here we have four rather typical cases: the first is me who makes myself attractive with lots of different and interesting things going on, a life of constant distraction – sort of ADD; Abi, who would have us think that everything is perfect and wonderful – hippie bliss sitting on a volcano; Rich, the action junkie and achiever who thinks he is what he does; and Marc who distracts himself with the details of life and tries to make himself invaluable to others.

In total, I have identified nine ‘Masks’ thus far and I will describe them in detail with many examples in the book. I will also talk about the symptoms and weaknesses in the writing and life of each type and the exercises and therapeutic modalities that have proven to be most effective.

Each type does certain things very well and other things terribly. A certain amount of this is getting people to become a bit of what they are not. For example, a terrific diagnostic tool is to ask how fast someone reads: the Achievers read very fast and have a good sense of story because that is what they read for. But their stories lack dimension and tend to be deductive as if to justify what they are doing. They also tend not to have a very good ear for prose and dialogue, but there are remedies for all these weaknesses.

A few months ago I taught a weekend seminar that included a number of older people who were very attracted to the subject. This was very interesting as the majority of people that I have taught are under 30. I learned, for example, that while most people’s narratives are fractured when they are most vulnerable as children, this can happen in adulthood and it can happen numerous times in one’s life. Experiencing combat is obviously a big cause but it can be any trauma that overwhelms your system. It can also be an event that derails your story, so your narrative must be realigned for your life to make sense again.

In some cases aligning one’s narrative involves reclaiming a disinherited part of one’s past. One woman told me that the 10 years before she became a pastor had absolutely nothing to do with the rest of her life. Somehow she had to make sense of it and I suggested that she might have been hibernating, which, as defined by Ralph Ellison, is “covert preparation for a more overt action.” Obviously those ten years were hugely important if only in counterpoint. She used her imagination and memory to deconstruct those

10 years and began to see the narrative that led to her decision to become a pastor.

Recently my work at Esalen Institute and in many foreign countries has interfaced with the broader 'therapeutic' community and that has produced more tools for healing. There is a handout that refers to the healing 'toolbox.'

Thank you.