

From the Kitchen

18 August 2010



Stories are powerful vehicles. They can entertain, they can inform, they can educate and they can instruct. They can also confuse, obfuscate, hide the truth, mislead and derail. It is the stories we tell ourselves that are the most important stories of all.

For most of us, everything we do, or don't do, is the result of such stories. Many of these stories we are not even aware of – most of them in fact – and they control us through this unconsciousness. If we can bring any such story to consciousness, we can gain control over our behaviour that results from that story.

Such a story may be, "My father doesn't appreciate anything I do and everything I do is never good enough for him". This can easily lead to a lifetime of feeling hopeless, inadequate and inferior, because every action is measured unconsciously against whether father would think it good enough – he wouldn't because, according to the story, he never does. If this all-driving story could be brought into consciousness, the person with the story can start to see that his/her behaviour is to some extent run by the story. This then allows for new behaviour which doesn't fulfil the unconscious expectations.

I learned this, and many other things about myself, years ago in the Landmark Forum. I was reminded of them recently when someone I know well participated in this excellent event. It showed me that I can easily allow things to slip back into the unconscious and be at the effect of it. I remember a psychologist (Liz Green in London) telling me more than thirty years ago that "we are fated to the extent that we are unconscious". The corollary of this is that the more we can be aware of what drives us and what gets in the way, the more power we have to have our lives be the way we would want.

The stories we tell or read to our children can feed into their unconscious all manner of attitudes about themselves, the people around them and the world they live in. They can grow adventurous or fearful through these stories, though which of these it will be may be unpredictable. We certainly owe it to our children to take care what we feed their minds.

The stories we tell or children and which may shape their lives, may not be deliberate in the telling or the intention. We can skew their developing thinking/feeling through repeated aphorisms such as "you can't trust anyone," or "all men are unreliable" or "all politicians are crooks". Our repeated 'advice' can also be positive: "everybody has good in them"; "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"; "you are capable of anything you set your mind to".

In many cultures children are told stories that deliberately imbue them with the beliefs and prejudices of their culture and, therefore, their beliefs about themselves. When there are no competing stories around, this works well and ensures cohesiveness and allows the young person to make sense of the behaviour of those around them and to operate in the world with effectiveness. Thus, Aboriginal children needed to learn about where to find water, what could and could not be eaten, which animals could be hunted and which could not – all through stories.

In modern Australia, this approach is problematic. Many parents try to inculcate a particular religious, cultural and/or philosophical beliefs in their children through storytelling. Difficulties arise when these children are also exposed to competing, even opposing, stories through school and through the electronic media they spend time with. Unless parents send their children to a school at which none of the other children are exposed to any competing stories at the school or at home, the confusion is inevitable. The best that parents can do is to bring up their children with a mindset that can allow them to work their way through the competing stories and reach their own conclusions. I understand that the Amish in the USA send their young folk out into the wider world for a year in their late teens in order to make their own choice of whether to live in that wider world or within the stricter community of their birth.

Even within an 'ordinary' family, it makes sense to acknowledge that there are views of the world that are at odds with the family's own stories about it. I have seen many young people fall apart when what their parents told them was true about the world turned out to be at odds with the parents' own behaviour. In a really enlightened family, the children would be brought up to understand that their attitudes and behaviours will to some extent (often to a large extent) be dictated by stories buried in the unconscious; and these children will also learn techniques to uncover these unknown drives. Schools could play an important part in this and such teaching could be far more important in the long run than reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic.