

## Stories of Adversity and Injustice

Two of the most common claims that life stories make concern *adversity* and *injustice*. Although these themes often over-lap, they are nevertheless distinct. It is useful to see which claim a story teller is making—and how. This is especially important because sometimes the storyteller is making a different claim from what we might expect. It is essential that we recognize what matters to the story teller—not what would matter to us if we were in their place.

**STORIES of ADVERSITY: How do story tellers emphasize the adversity they faced—and what they did to overcome it? They make sure—through special emphasis and sometimes exaggeration—that we appreciate some of these things:**

- a) The situation was really dangerous, the opponent was really powerful
- b) Other people failed to take needed action, either because they didn't recognize that something needed to be done, or because they were passive and intimidated
- c) The protagonist was also reluctant to act, at least at first: it would have been safer, more comfortable to do nothing
- d) Eventually the protagonist acted decisively – despite the danger, despite the fact that no one else did anything
- e) The protagonist's action had a very large effect – it made a splash, blew everyone else out of the water

**STORIES of INJUSTICE: How do story tellers emphasize the injustices they have faced? They make sure that we appreciate some of these things:**

- a) Other people were unfair
- b) Other people, who could have and should have been paying attention and providing care, did not.
- c) Other people refuse to help even when it would be easy enough for them to do so, and when they should have done so
- d) Other people have been unreasonably critical, judgmental, or punitive.

**Here are half-a-dozen short excerpts from interviews I did. Some of these emphasize the adversity the narrator faced; some, the injustice. Which is which? How, exactly, does each excerpt go about making these claims?**

**Ken**: We started talking about the business, and they [his father and brother] were both sitting there patting themselves on the back, on what a wonderful job they had done. I said, “What kind of horseshit is this? Don’t you think I have made a viable kind of contribution?” And they said, “Hell no. We could have hired a guy like you; anybody could hire a supervisor. The real contribution was made by Jack and I.”

**Henry**: Truck driving was the most physically exhausting job I’ve ever had. In some ways it is like school: you are alone, completely in charge, and you always have the option of not doing it. You learn to carry through with the work no matter how cold it is, or how tired and sick you feel. You just say, “Well, I guess I’ll go out there and do it.”

**Kim**: My car broke down...and I couldn’t get to finals and I needed my father to wire me some money to get this car out of the shop...and he said, “If you had a job you wouldn’t be where you are right now.

**Chris**: I would have needed \$800 dollars a semester to go to Columbia, because everything else would have been paid for by loans and grants...but [my father] thought that was way too much money. I never asked him for money to get through college until then. He said, “You are not a bum.”

**Paul**: I hitchhiked home one time and got stuck in this village for two days. I was sleeping outside with hyenas around at night—hyenas that can tear your face off.

**Lew**: Let me describe what it is like being an actor. It is a very difficult experience for someone who is not sure of himself. You have to sell yourself. A constant, repetitious selling yourself. And I had been the first in my peer group to take that step, to go out and look for a job. I broke the ice here too. And I was proud of myself.

**Catherine**: I was fascinated by [the Catholic] idea of a difference between mortal and venial sin, because in my family it did not seem that there was anything less than a mortal sin, and that was, you know, not brushing your teeth well enough. And that if I got caught in something minor their whole view of me would shift, and I would become like Cindy, another bad daughter.

**Here are another half-dozen excerpts. These may be harder to sort out.**

**Ann:** When I was in high school I would hear other students talk about their parents contacting schools, doing this and doing that, making the kids sit down and write out their application. As important as it was to my Dad for me to go to college, he took absolutely no part in the process, and I think it was just that they had no concept of what was involved.

**Al:** The popular dogs of the day were assertive boxers and high-strung poodles. A whole bunch of them, and I was always a paperboy. I got bit in my work frequently... Nobody thought dogs were biting kids. You were afraid of them and nobody did anything about it.

**Mike:** [The other downtown merchants] are not my peer group. Surprisingly few businessmen are open and honest about what their problems are... If I were involved in a group I would want to get right in under their goddamn skin and make them bloody mad, realizing what is happening, and that there are things we as a merchants' group can do about it.

**Suzanne:** I worked with this one boy in a court-ordered anger management group in a school system. And ... [his] father's in jail, the mother works about 75 hours a week, she is never there, two of the brothers are in jail, three of the kids who are at home we believe they are selling drugs... The kid's got severe learning disabilities, got severe mental problems. The mother will not allow him to have any therapy, none. "There is nothing wrong with him." He is about 250 pounds, and he is about four feet tall, and he has got some kind of ADD or something like that. They don't want him to have any medication, they don't want him to have any therapy; "He's fine." (This vignette goes on to describe her work with this client.)

**Catherine:** [getting lost /finding her way home alone]. "It never occurred to me that I could just sit down and cry... I could have thrown myself on the mercy of the first passing adult and gotten out of the situation, but I never saw myself, even as a little kid, as having so little responsibility."

**Finally, here are two longer quotes that seem particularly difficult to categorize. I think you could make a reasonable argument that both of these excerpts contain elements of adversity and injustice. Nevertheless, I think that in both excerpts, one of those claims is more important than the other.**

**Suzanne** [from a study of local community activists]: There was a march in my street and it was all black kids marching and all white people standing and watching them. .. I remember the ... one white person in the march –she was going up the street with a petition ... and no one would touch it, so I just stepped out and signed it. And I was like, “I committed myself; alright, they are going to hate me now!” So it was kind of no going back after that.

**Mike (describing his father)** [He was] an absolute tyrant, and I would never knuckle under. Until I was eight or nine he would get me up in the middle of the night and beat the living shit out of me; kick me out of bed and make me sleep on straw. He would tell me if I was going to conduct myself like an animal I would sleep like an animal... He would wake me up, find that the bed was wet, beat the living crap out of me, and make me sleep on straw. Defiance, whatever his philosophy was, whatever reason I was wetting the bed, he felt that was an instance that I was not trainable. And his capacity to understand, be compassionate, whatever is necessary, was not there.

His approach was just shattering, not so much to me but to my mother. She will never forgive him. Other than the fact that she is a very compassionate woman, in a couple of instances she probably could have killed him. Ninety-nine percent of the beatings I deserved...I covered a lot of territory when I was a kid.

## NOTICING SIMILARITIES

### What is this exercise?

- The purpose of this exercise is to notice how an informant may describe several people, or several different difficult situations, in very similar terms.
- Below you will find four examples – read through each of them carefully. What is the common theme in the way each of these men talks?

### What do you need to do with your own interview?

- Find 3-5 quotes, each a few sentences long, that are, in some important way, similar.
- Bring 6 copies to class. We will discuss these in small groups.

**(A) Lew: a 35-year old therapist, previously worked as an actor.**

#### **Working at the tool-and-die company, imprecise drawings, boss made him do them over:**

“So he kept me doing the basic stuff over and over again. And the anxiety of having to do this, and coming to work, was too much... I began to feel claustrophobic, a real heavy sense of being trapped.”

#### **First acting job, involved with the woman who played the female lead:**

I was working with this woman who just saw through my ability. She said, “This guy can’t do it.” Every chance she put me down... I took so much grief from this woman that for the rest of the summer I was in a depression, the most serious I have ever had... this feeling that I will never be able to support myself... She had her own problems; she was heavily on tranquilizers... The irony of it was that she was also coming on to me. We started seeing each other, and she was just as caustic and malicious personally as she was on stage. But I was challenged. It had become a life or death situation.

#### **Another acting job, this time in graduate school:**

There was this older woman I wanted to impress. If I had thought about it, she was impressed anyway. She had her own hang-ups. But two or three times I wasn’t able to do it with her, and it scared me. “Is this an indication that I am gay?” ... I felt I could never do as well again as I did on the first performance of that play. I feared every night it would get worse... I still have this fear that if someone took a good look at me they would see a sham. I am still scared that it is not real. Every year I think less of that.

#### **He describes one of his supervisors (job at a bank):**

This supervisor covered a book with brown paper, but so accurately that it took two or three hours. I said, “I hope you are going to read that book, because you are sure taking a lot of care

with it.” It was obviously one of the first hardcover books he’d bought; I couldn’t see him reading it.

**Description of himself as a young man:**

Most of my life as younger person was seen from inside, like encased in a shell. Walking around with this piece of translucent concrete around me... I always felt I was seeing what was going on around me... I was collecting images of people. On the subway I would see how people read, how they farted, how they fidgeted around.

**(B) Al, a real estate salesman who, in his previous career, was a book editor.**

**Both parents:** “genuinely respected and humble people,” deeply committed to left-wing causes.

**His father:** a musicologist, whom Al describes as having a very deep, emotional connection with music.

“He was hopeless old skinflint, tighter than hell.”

“In my early years he was critical and bad tempered... I was afraid of him... I wasn’t beaten, but chased”

**His mother:** “She was a very dour women, sour, even. She came out of childhood with the name Mary Sunshine, and the candy store operator called her Bubbles. [The nicknames were clearly ironic.] Well, she was old sour puss herself. Her hair was always pulled back. She never wore fancy clothes, or good clothes. Never treated herself as female.”

**His sister:** “Gives a ton of presents and then takes them back. She uses gifts as a weapon of some sort. It is funny, because in many ways she is a very tender woman, very sensitive. She has an eye for shape and form; very expressive. It is a very energetic part of her. [However] there is no warmth to her at all. Cold as ice. Her warmth is superficial.”

**His Grandmother:** “an eccentric old shit, incapacitated by terminal miserliness...”

**The Shakers [whom he studied in graduate school]:** The music itself was terribly moving, and it kindled an interest that I’d had all along in community building. Not because I think they are great; I think they are a bunch of idiots, frankly. They are a pretty rough bunch toward each other. They are rigid and demanding, a rather humorless group. ... There was something about the emotionalism of it that I found very appealing, though I can’t come to terms with their rather pathetic philosophy, which was terribly humble... Fucking or no fucking [the Shakers were celibate that’s not the weakness. The weakness is that they had no will. And I’ve got plenty.

**Spencer [his boss]:** He is fond of everyone and close to no one. He is a ferocious tennis player; he can knock the shit out of someone half his age. But always very clean. Tennis is a gentleman’s game. You

never hear an off-color comment, or a dirty word from Spencer. Never a raised voice; you rarely see him frustrated or angry.

He does not have a good sense of the needs and expectations of the people who work for him. It is reflected in his home life. His wife has reported to me with some pain that he wasn't much of a father. He found it difficult to relate to the needs of his daughters. He didn't see the connection between them and him, didn't take them very close into his heart. He ran them the way he runs his business. Waitresses, daughters, they are all the same. A very distant man, covered up by this gentle, quiet demeanor.



**C) Ken: The chief executive officer of a tool-and-die manufacturing company**

- The union reps work like a classical debate guy. They will antagonize you intentionally to get you or your subordinates to say something that they can pick up on... So I will [tell my subordinates] "If something is brought up on this particular thing just ignore it and stay away from it." People may not know that they are being controlled, but I am controlling that meeting. I can have a surrogate in there talking on a certain issue, but it has been role-played beforehand and I am in total control of that situation.

- I deal with a lot of machinery salesmen, and they are really aggressive guys. It is a rough business, real competitive; steel and machinery are like that. And they are professionals at dominating a sales meeting: "Sign up, sign up, do this, do that." So what I do is encroach on their so-called perimeter, really cut their defenses down. [Here he moved his chair very close to mine and leaned forward.] I play the body language thing, get real close, until the guy is uneasy, the sweat is pouring out of him, he doesn't know what the hell is going on. Pretty soon he is totally out of control, he is so anxious to get out of there... And I found that once you pull that type of thing all of a sudden your relationship changes. Next time it will be more as if I were a peer and not some guy where they have to put the move on him.

## **Bob: Vice president of a family business that manufactures auto parts**

### **Asking business colleagues for help:**

I can only present fact, which takes on the appearance of strategy. It is not really a strategy. Business is often not a matter of decisions. The mystique of the big decision makers is largely bullshit. They are mostly yes and no decisions. It is the same with Ford: either help me or put me out of business. These decisions are simply a matter of fact. It's an old legal thing. There they are, *nolo contendere*. You are looking at it; how do you see it? And how do you call it?

### **A discussion with his wife:**

At one point my wife asked, "How long are you going to do this?"

"How long am I going to do what?"

"Beat your head against a wall. It is not good for anyone; you are not fun, not friendly."

I said, "However long it takes."

She said, "Well, if I know it will end at some point we will get through it. If it is going to last forever, I don't want any part of it."

It wasn't a threat or an ultimatum, just a statement of fact. It is not a good way for the kids to live... That is good. It makes you say, "Oh, I guess it is that bad."

### **A memory of his father:**

I remember him whipping me, twice. Both times I think it was for the same offense. One time I was playing. Dinner was at six; I didn't get home until 7:30. It was probably more that my mother was frantic that pissed him off, rather than that I wasn't there. He probably would not have fed me. He took his belt out. Oh, that was the ultimate punishment, not getting hit but the threat. He would hold his belt out and say, "Smell it." Oh, and you'd hold your breath and say, "I am not going to smell that Goddamn belt." It would be this battle of wills. Shit, he didn't do anything but stand there; you had to breathe sometime.

**Themes in the Life Stories of Three Men:** This exercise illustrates how each person retells several incidents using his own distinct narrative formula. As you read these vignettes, see what similarities you notice. Does the main character face similar problems again and again; does he solve those problems in similar ways?

**Lew:** Studied theater in college, and got a summer job in a local company. He did well, but got severely depressed when the lead actress (his girlfriend) told everyone that he really could not act very well.

I was working with this woman who just saw through my ability. She said, "This guy can't do it." I took so much grief from this woman that for the rest of the summer I was in a depression, the most serious I have ever had—this feeling that I will never be able to support myself...She had her own problems; she was heavily on tranquilizers.

When the season ended he went home. He was depressed for a month, then left home and somehow recovered

When I say, "depressed," I mean I woke up and it hit me. I'd spend the day alienated from everything going on. I would just walk in a daze. And then I survived again. I got in this Volkswagen that my brother gave me, which I didn't know how to drive. He gave me a 15-minute lesson and said, 'Okay, now you are on your own.' I drove to Atlantic City, where I knew some people who were working on a Shakespeare festival and got a job in about a day.

After college, he put together his own one-man show that he performed at various college campuses:

I would drive to some school, set myself up, perform, pack everything up, drive to another school, perform, sometimes two, three, four times a day, then find myself a motel or drive to the next city and find a motel, and do the thing all over again. I did that for five months, and I succeeded. I blew an engine in the car and got another one. Sometimes I ran out of money and had to sleep in my car. I really just pitted myself against the worst conditions... It gave me some sense that I was a good survivor.

Later he worked as a disk-jockey for a radio station. But when the station was sold, Lew -- and his girlfriend, Carol, who also worked there -- found themselves unemployed.

Carol wanted to get her strength back together. We were unemployed for three months. I managed to get odd jobs, but she was incapacitated, so she wanted to build up some confidence. Both of us had lost our jobs, but I am a resourceful person. Although I was depressed... I don't sit around moping about it. I do something, even if it is not what I want to do. It keeps me interested and involved.

A few months later, Lew decided to start over in a new direction.

I didn't see myself growing in radio so... I went down to CETA and told them, "I want to do a career change; I don't know in what. I think social service might be something I'd like to try." I applied for one job, told them I had no credentials. But what I had learned in my previous background was how to act. I can sell a line of bullshit real well... I didn't get in initially, but the woman they hired quit the first day and they called me.

When I interviewed him, he was the director of a social service agency (for which he had no formal qualifications). He was thinking of leaving his job and moving to California, despite the fact that the whole country was in an economic depression, and jobs of any sort were hard to find. He explained:

It really does not take a whole lot of ingenuity to do what you want, because everyone else is fearful... You are one step ahead of everyone else who is afraid. They take one or two or three major risks in their life and that is it. And a lot of times they regret it the rest of their lives, and they don't know how to move away from it. I like risky people who assert themselves for what they want... they seek out the things that make them happy.

### Questions about Lew

When situations go bad for Lew, how does he feel? (Angry? Frightened? Betrayed? Depressed?)

When he finds himself in a tough situation, what does he do about it? For example, does he fight back and defeat whoever is his opponent? Does he talk things over with whoever is making life difficult and negotiate a reasonable compromise? Does he move on to something new?

How does Lew contrast himself with others? Does he claim, for example, that they get angry while he stays calm? Does he say that they blame someone else, while he tries to see the other person's point of view? Does he claim that they suffer helplessly, while he moves on and survives?

**Mike** was physically abused by his father, and perhaps as a result, became something of a juvenile delinquent. He recalls some of his childhood escapades with glee:

They were building a new police building. They were all on the first floor; we got up to the third floor, and lo and behold, what is up there but a great big double-doored safe. I said, "Come on, let's get this thing moving!" We pushed it right through the fucking wall. It was too big to go through a window. That sucker went right through the brick wall, down three flights, through the frickin' sidewalk. The cops came roaring out the front door; we went out the back.

He dropped out of high school because, he claims, he was so far ahead of everyone else that he got bored. [On closer questioning, I learned that he was actually behind where he should have been.]

If someone had told me I could finish high school in 3 years, I probably would have tried to do it sooner, but since I had to be there 4 years come hell or high water, it just didn't seem to do a thing for me.... I was ahead of the schedule that might have been expected, but I was behind my own.

I will get into something very often and become disenchanted, lose of my own direction or the challenge, or just stagnate... The courses at first would be a challenge, but inevitably I would get ahead of them, the where they would bore me. I would burn out too quickly; I'd attack them... I'd be too far ahead, waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. I have always been extremely aggressive in that respect. Always went in with a full head of steam, like a bullet fired into the air. It takes off like a banshee, but eventually it reaches its apogee and that's it. It runs out of steam and just falls down.

Eventually he got a job as a quality control inspector for Pratt-Whitney, an engineering firm.

The amount of respect for the products we produced was just mind-blowing. I could go in and just bring a corporation the size of Bendix to an absolute standstill, just on my word... I'd tell them to shut the whole production line down. And their expenditures were absolute millions of dollars, just on my word... The managers over me felt fairly threatened. I recognized that and enjoyed it, relished it.

Later he started a company of his own; eventually this company merged with a larger one.

My achievements have not been easy victories... When I built the piping company, for most people it would have been enough to just build up a successful company; to others, enough to merge it with a larger corporation. Or another step further, to be given responsibility for a whole corporation. That wasn't enough for me. I had to have the whole everything, and let everyone else sit back and clip their coupons.

Mike tried to become the director of the larger company, but his attempt to take over everything was thwarted by some of the other shareholders.

The bastards were not going to let me own any more [stock in the company]; they were scared to death of me.

When I interviewed him, he was running a furniture store, but the store was losing money to cheaper places in the malls. I asked him whether he had ever talked to any of his fellow-merchants about the competition they all faced.

They are not my peer group. Surprisingly few businessmen are open and honest about what their problems are. I am an open book; you pinch me, I yell. If I were involved in a group I would want to get right in under their goddamn skin and make them bloody mad, realizing what is happening, and that there are things we as a merchants group can do about it.

### **Questions about Mike:**

What is Mike's way of dealing with difficult situations? Does he carefully figure out a plan and pursue it methodically?

What does he do with other people? Reason calmly? Help them with their problems? Attack them and defeat them? Provoke them until they explode?

In what ways does Mike claim that he is different from other people—and better?

Both Mike and Lew emphasize the fact that they are “on the move,” while other people stand still. Does movement have the same meaning for both of them? If not, what is the difference?

**Bob:** was the director of a small company that manufactured automobile parts. When I interviewed him, the company was in serious financial trouble – the result of an industry-wide depression. Bob needed help from his associates in other companies, but he was reluctant to ask for any personal favors. Instead, he put the matter in terms of an impersonal business decision:

I told him, “I make a high quality part for you, which means no rejections for you either. Now we are in financial trouble, and the corporate head seems to prefer to give the job to someone else, as opposed to helping me out. If you could speak to him, tell him, “Here is a quality supplier we don’t want to lose,” I will be improve my financial situation and be better able to help you in the future.” I said, “Help us if you want to. If not, try someone else, and maybe they will be as good, and maybe not.”

I can only present fact, which takes on the appearance of strategy. It’s really not a strategy. Business is often not a matter of decisions. The mystique of the big decision makers is largely bullshit. They are mostly Yes and No decisions. Either keep me, or put me out of business. These are simply a matter of fact... It’s an old legal thing. There they are, *nolo contendere*. You are looking at it; how do you see it? And you call it.

The struggle to keep the business going was taking a toll on Bob’s family.

At one point my wife asked, “How long are you going to do this?” “How long am I going to do what?” “Beat your head against a wall. It is not good for anyone; you are not fun, not friendly.”

I said, “However long it takes.”

She said, “Well, if I know that it will end at some point we will get through it. If it is going to last forever, I don’t want any part of it.”

It wasn’t a threat or an ultimatum, just a statement of fact. It is not a good way for the kids to live... That is good. It makes you say, Oh, I guess it is that bad.”

Bob’s description of how business decisions are made reminded me of something else he said. The company was originally founded by Bob’s father and uncle; however, they quarreled fiercely when the uncle began drinking too much to attend to business. Eventually Bob’s father stopped paying the Uncle’s weekly salary (although the Uncle could have easily written his own checks.) Bob recalls one attempt that his father made to settle the dispute.

My father said, “Write down a number on a piece of paper, whatever you think the company is worth, and I will either pay you that, or sell it for that amount.”

The uncle refused this offer, swearing that he would ruin Bob’s father first. The dispute finally ended when the uncle died. Bob says the uncle died of alcoholism, but he also mentioned that the other side of the family has a different story: they still say that the uncle “died of a broken heart.” When it came time to settle the estate, the uncle’s family accused Bob and his father of cheating them. Bob, however, says that they complied fully with a written agreement drawn up years earlier. Bob said, “It is all very neat.”

As for Bob’s childhood history: there is nothing quite as dramatic as in Lew or Mike’s story. Nevertheless, here is one memory that may provide a clue about how Bob makes sense of his life:

I can remember [my Dad] whipping me...I was playing; dinner was at six; I didn’t get home until 7:30. It was probably more that my mother was frantic that pissed him off, rather than that I wasn’t there. He probably would not have fed me. He took his belt out. Oh, that was the ultimate punishment, not getting hit, but the threat. He would hold his belt out and say, “Smell it.” Oh, and you would hold your breath and say, “I am not going to smell that Goddamn belt.” It would be a battle of wills. Shit, he didn’t do anything but stand there; you had to breathe sometime...

## Questions about Bob

Did Bob’s wife give him an ultimatum?

Bob says that most business decisions are “simply a matter of fact.” What does he mean?

What similarity do you see between the way:

- Bob asked his business associates to buy parts from him;
- his wife asked him how long he was going to keep struggling;
- his father handled the fight with his uncle;
- his father punished him?