

## A Story For People Who Want To Change The World

by Rachel Naomi Remen

Some thoughts on how change happens:

Like most of us I am a passionate change agent. After all, who would spend a third of their life accumulating all that knowledge and skill if not for the hope of making a difference? So it is surprising how long it has taken me to recognize the power of a simple story to make change.

I have always been a story teller. In the past this tendency was viewed by my medical colleagues as, to say the least, dubious. In Medicine a story is often dismissed as “anecdotal evidence”, a sort of second class data far less relevant to a physician’s work than the outcome of a well designed scientific study. “You only have the one example?” my colleagues would ask me when I told them a story. “What you’re describing only happened to one person? How important is that?” But over time I have learned that a story about just one person can change everything. Easter only happened to one person.

One of the most skilled social activists I know is a genius of change, a woman who can enter a room of people who have held opposing positions for years and in a matter of a few hours enable them to work together as colleagues. I asked her how she manages to do this. “Simple, “ she said. “You just change the story they are holding about themselves and each other.”

A new story is a place of greater freedom and possibility. This is as true of the stories that we hold in common as an organization, an institution or a nation, as it is about the stories we carry about ourselves.

We all have stories about ourselves that diminish us, stories we sometimes believe for years which are not true. Often these stories rob us of our strength and our potential. When I was 15, the doctor who told me that I had Crohn’s disease also told me a story. “Rachel,” he said “You have an incurable disease. You cannot expect to live a full life.” But my story has been far different than that.

As a writer, I have learned not to rush to fill a blank page with words. I have learned the patience to sit before a blank page and wait. A blank page is a place of revelation. I have learned to trust that something will happen there over time that has never been seen before. A diagnosis is like that too. A place of discovery. An encounter with the Unknown. The wisdom may lie in labeling only the disease process; and then accompanying people as they write their story and its possibility.

As change agents our stories empower or diminish us too. Our change agency is only as good as our personal cosmology, our story about the nature of the world. The closer our personal cosmology comes to the nature of reality, the more effective we are in making a

difference. I come from a medical family, so when I was young it seemed obvious to me that the world was broken and people were broken too. Change was simply a function of acquiring the knowledge, the technique, the science to fix things. I no longer see things in quite that way. One of the oldest Wisdom stories about change, a story from the 14th century, offers a somewhat different viewpoint. This story tells us that in the Beginning the world was whole, but that at some point in the history of things there was a great accident which scattered the wholeness of the world into an infinite number of tiny sparks of wholeness. These sparks fell into all events, all organizations and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day. The story goes on to say that the whole human race is a response to this accident. We have been born because we can discover and uncover the hidden spark of wholeness in all events, all organizations and all people...we can lift it up and strengthen it and make it visible once again ... and by doing so we can heal the world back into its original wholeness. So restoring the wholeness of the world is not only a function of our expertise, it is also a part of our birthright as human beings. We have the power to further the wholeness of things just as we are, with our listening, our belief, our encouragement and our love.

So perhaps change is less about fixing a broken world and more about uncovering hidden wholeness in all events, all organizations and all people and remembering our personal power to make a difference. This old story has greatly changed the way that I am a physician and also a teacher. It has given me new eyes. Everyone and everything has in it a seed of a greater wholeness, a dream of possibility. Perhaps what I once saw as "broken" or "lacking" might just as easily be seen as the growing edge of things ... a place to be valued and nurtured in our patients, our students and in ourselves.

Blessings,

Rachel