

## How To Stay Sane: The Art of Revising Your Inner Storytelling by Maria Popova

“Our stories give shape to our inchoate, disparate, fleeting impressions of everyday life.”

“I pray to Jesus to preserve my sanity,” Jack Kerouac professed in discussing his writing routine. But those of us who fall on the more secular end of the spectrum might need a slightly more potent sanity-preservation tool than prayer. That’s precisely what writer and psychotherapist Philippa Perry offers in *How To Stay Sane* (public library; UK), part of The School of Life’s wonderful series reclaiming the traditional self-help genre as intelligent, non-self-helpy, yet immensely helpful guides to modern living.

At the heart of Perry’s argument — in line with neurologist Oliver Sacks’s recent meditation on memory and how “narrative truth,” rather than “historical truth,” shapes our impression of the world — is the recognition that stories make us human and learning to reframe our interpretations of reality is key to our experience of life:

Our stories give shape to our inchoate, disparate, fleeting impressions of everyday life. They bring together the past and the future into the present to provide us with structures for working towards our goals. They give us a sense of identity and, most importantly, serve to integrate the feelings of our right brain with the language of our left.

[...]

We are primed to use stories. Part of our survival as a species depended upon listening to the stories of our tribal elders as they shared parables and passed down their experience and the wisdom of those who went before. As we get older it is our short-term memory that fades rather than our long-term memory. Perhaps we have evolved like this so that we are able to tell the younger generation about the stories and experiences that have formed us which may be important to subsequent generations if they are to thrive.

I worry, though, about what might happen to our minds if most of the stories we hear are about greed, war and atrocity.

Perry goes on to cite research indicating that people who watch television for more than four hours a day see themselves as far more likely to fall victim in a violent incident in the forthcoming week than their peers who watch less than two hours a day. Just like E. B. White advocated for the responsibility of the writer to “to lift people up, not lower them down,” so too is our responsibility as the writers of our own life-stories to avoid the well-documented negativity bias of modern media — because, as artist Austin Kleon wisely put it, “you are a mashup of what you let into your life.” Perry writes:

Be careful which stories you expose yourself to.

[...]

The meanings you find, and the stories you hear, will have an impact on how optimistic you are: it's how we evolved. ... If you do not know how to draw positive meaning from what happens in life, the neural pathways you need to appreciate good news will never fire up.

[...]

The trouble is, if we do not have a mind that is used to hearing good news, we do not have the neural pathways to process such news.

Yet despite the adaptive optimism bias of the human brain, Perry argues a positive outlook is a practice — and one that requires mastering the art of vulnerability and increasing our essential tolerance for uncertainty:

You may find that you have been telling yourself that practicing optimism is a risk, as though, somehow, a positive attitude will invite disaster and so if you practice optimism it may increase your feelings of vulnerability. The trick is to increase your tolerance for vulnerable feelings, rather than avoid them altogether.

[...]

Optimism does not mean continual happiness, glazed eyes and a fixed grin. When I talk about the desirability of optimism I do not mean that we should delude ourselves about reality. But practicing optimism does mean focusing more on the positive fall-out of an event than on the negative. ... I am not advocating the kind of optimism that means you blow all your savings on a horse running at a hundred to one; I am talking about being optimistic enough to sow some seeds in the hope that some of them will germinate and grow into flowers.

Another key obstruction to our sanity is our chronic aversion to being wrong, entwined with our damaging fear of the unfamiliar. Perry cautions:

We all like to think we keep an open mind and can change our opinions in the light of new evidence, but most of us seem to be geared to making up our minds very quickly. Then we process further evidence not with an open mind but with a filter, only acknowledging the evidence that backs up our original impression. It is too easy for us to fall into the trap of believing that being right is more important than being open to what might be.

If we practice detachment from our thoughts we learn to observe them as though we are taking a bird's eye view of our own thinking. When we do this, we might find that our thinking belongs to an older, and different, story to the one we are now living.

Perry concludes:

We need to look at the repetitions in the stories we tell ourselves [and] at the process of the stories rather than merely their surface content. Then we can begin to experiment with changing the filter through which we look at the world, start to edit the story and thus regain flexibility where we have been getting stuck.

Complement How To Stay Sane with radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich's 1948 list of the six rules for creative sanity.