

WALK YOUR TALK

It's Not the Event, It's the Story

Choosing the Story That Sets You Free
Rev. Blaine Tinsley

Introduction

Something happens every day — a comment, a setback, a surprise, a loss. These are the events of our lives. But here is the truth at the heart of this talk: it is not the event itself that shapes our reality. It is the story we tell about it. In Unity, we teach and learn that we assign the meaning to the events of our lives. And because we assign the meaning, we have the power to choose it.

The Whole Foods Wake-Up Call

I was in the produce aisle at Whole Foods when an old acquaintance tilted his head and said four words: “*Wow. You look different.*” That was the event. What followed was the story. In three seconds, my mind transformed a neutral remark into a full-blown inner drama about aging, decline, and not being good enough. I walked out carrying more than organic kale.

This is what Buddhists call the second arrow. The first arrow is the painful event. The second arrow is the extra suffering we inflict on ourselves through our reaction and interpretation. As the Buddha taught, the second arrow is optional. The comment did not cause the suffering. The story did.

It's Not the Event, It's the Story

“People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them.”
— Epictetus

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus understood that between what happens to us, and how we feel about it, there is a layer of interpretation. That layer is the story — and that is where our freedom lives. In Unity, we assign meaning, but we can also reassign it.

Narrative Identity: The Story We Tell Ourselves

Psychologist Dan McAdams calls our inner autobiography our narrative identity — the ongoing story we tell ourselves about who we are. We are the main character. We cast everyone else. We decide whether life is trending upward or downward, meaningful or random. Research shows this inner story is one of the strongest predictors of our well-being, resilience, and sense of purpose.

McAdams identified two core story patterns. A *redemption sequence* moves from bad to good — a difficult experience becomes a source of growth, wisdom, or unexpected blessing. A *contamination sequence* moves from good to bad — something hopeful gets permanently overshadowed by what went wrong. Same event. Two different stories. Two completely different lives.

The Bhagavad Gita speaks directly to this: “*The mind is the friend of the soul, and the mind is also its enemy.*” When we train our minds toward redemption, the mind lifts us. When we let it default to contamination, it drags us down. *People who habitually tell contamination stories tend to experience more anxiety and depression, feel less meaning in life, and are less motivated to contribute to others.*

We Always Have a Say In Here

“We may not be able to control what happens out there, but we always have a say in what happens in here.”

— Eric Butterworth

Neuroscientist Dr. Joe Dispenza confirms this scientifically: *“The affirmations we repeat to ourselves on a daily basis are the programs we live by.”* Neurons that fire together, wire together. Every story we rehearse etches deeper into our neural circuitry. A chronic story of stress keeps the body flooded with stress hormones. A story of meaning and trust does the opposite. Change your story, change your brain.

Choosing a redemption story does not mean denying pain. Redemption stories say: *“Yes, this happened. It hurt. And here is what I am doing with it.”* They do not pretend that the first arrow did not land. They simply refuse to let it have the final word. That is spiritual alchemy — turning trials into something meaningful in the telling.

A Moment of Reflection

Bring to mind a recent event that caused you stress or pain. Notice the story you have been telling yourself about it. Is it a contamination story — where something good got ruined? Now gently ask: Is there another way to look at this? What possible growth or meaning could come from it? You do not have to force an answer. Simply ask and listen. Then take a breath and imagine releasing the second arrow — the extra suffering. You are not the bad thing that happened. You are the storyteller who gets to decide what it means.

AFFIRMATION

I am the storyteller of my life.
I choose a story of growth, healing, and love.
It’s not the event, it’s the story —
and I choose a good story now.

Conclusion and Call to Action

You cannot always control the events. Life will live, and first arrows will land. But you hold something no circumstance can take from you: the pen. This week, when something goes sideways, pause before the story takes hold. Ask yourself: *“What is the highest, most loving story I can tell about this?”* Repeat the affirmation daily. Return to the reflection when you need it.

Your life is a sacred story. Tell it with honesty, with courage, and with love. And trust that with God as your co-author, the arc of your story always bends toward redemption.

A BLESSING FOR YOU

May you be gentle with yourself when the second arrow flies. May you pause long enough to hear the still, small voice within you that already knows the higher story. May the events that have wounded you become the very ground from which your greatest wisdom grows. May you remember, on the hard days, that you are not the storm, you are the one who watches the storm and holds the pen. And may you know, in the deepest place, that the Divine is always co-authoring with you, weaving even the broken threads into something beautiful.

Go in peace and tell a good story.

With love, Rev. Blaine,

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