

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #9:
Closing the Book of Stories
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

JULY 3, 2020 — There once was a family member, a young man who struggled with an issue that made my heart ache. When it first came to light, his immediate family, parents and siblings, surrounded him with support. Since I was only an aunt, I was not invited into that inner circle of care. All I could do is stand on the outside and pray. I understood this, yet I felt excluded. Once again, as a single person, I was on the outside. I stood alone.

Circumstances of late, in this land of COVID-19, reminded me of that time. I shared the experience with a dear neighbor. In offering her own understanding, she repeated my words back to me. I may not have been included in that immediate circle of the nuclear family, she said, but I still had a role to play, standing as I was in the next circle out. Her words triggered something in me that was as surprising as it was truthful.

“No, I was not, *I am not*, an outsider,” I claimed. “I may not always be in the room physically with family members who are in pain, but I am connected both spiritually and energetically.

“I am not an outsider.”

Sometimes we have to speak a truth before we can know it. And that was certainly the case in this situation. My words that recent afternoon shifted my focus from the little truth that I had been living to the larger truth that I have been slowly moving toward, one that gave a more clear picture of reality.

As science has proven and theology teaches, we are all connected.

As I look back on my life, and the role that I played in supporting various family members in times of trouble over the years, I see that despite my feelings of being on the outside, I was living out that connection. I just could not see that until the other day as I sat in my side yard, talking with my neighbor sitting six feet away.

I grew up as one of five children of two working class parents. My older brother and sister were two years apart and then there was a five year gap before I came along. Another gap followed, this one four years long, before my younger sister and brother were born two years apart. I felt as if I were a little island in the middle of all these siblings. I felt alone. “Why didn’t you have a brother for me,” I asked my mother.

So throughout my life, particularly since I never married or had children, I operated as a single individual, making my own way in the world. Yes, I have these siblings with mates and children who love me, and I love them in return, but I do not have my “own” family. I am alone. I am an outsider.

That is the story that I lived most of my life, and that is the story that I see me now closing the book on. It is a story that no longer serves, if it ever did.

I recall one way I lived out this outsider status was by accumulating hurts. What a waste that was. Yet, rather than let this insight stand as a self-criticism, I simply recognize that it was where I was. And where we are is where we are. We can take steps to change our location for the future, but first we need to accept where we stand at that moment and then consider: do I want to be someplace else, and, if so, how do I get there?

For me that means if I am to live my beliefs, and not just espouse them, tossing them about like glitter that shines but has no true value, then I need to start by not claiming things that are not true.

Who Would We Be Without Our Story is collection of dialogues with Bryon Katie, an author and teacher known for her work called *The Work*, a method of inquiry that helps an individual identify those thoughts that cause stress yet likely hold no truth.

“I discovered that when I believed my thoughts, I suffered, but that when I didn’t believe them, I didn’t suffer,” says Bryon Katie.¹

I confess, when I first picked up this book, I thought from the title that the book would be about how important our stories are, how they shape us and give our lives meaning. As a writer who loves stories, I was sure I would find within the book’s pages an affirmation of all that is good about stories. I was wrong. Stories are important and they do shape us, but too often the stories we allow to form our lives are stories that need to be discarded. These are the stories that do not give our lives meaning, but instead cause us pain—which is as sad as it is harmful. That is because when examined on a deeper level, we often find that the stories we tell ourselves, particularly the ones that reinforce our wounds, are not true in the way we cast them.

This does not mean we are not to speak truth to any abuse we may have experienced in life. That in itself would be a wrong. But at same time we also need to be able to see the lies our stories tell us.

For years, I easily accumulated hurts. I created cupboards for them, and when they were full, I built shelves along my walls to hold more. Regularly, I dusted the hurts off, and as I did, I picked each up and stroked it. I used them as proof that I was misunderstood, unappreciated, and even unloved. Even when friends would try to commiserate that they too had similar stories, I knew better. No, they were not dealing with what I had in my hand. They didn’t understand. It became a new hurt that I polished up and put on the shelf. It took years for me to realize that this was not a healthy exercise.

Slowly, I began the process of clearing those shelves and cupboards. Occasionally I would come across a stockpile I had forgotten about. My temptation was to say, “Ah! I was right all along. Look at this proof!”

This happened when I was literally cleaning out old files. I had cancelled checks going back years, most of which I no longer needed. My plan was to shred them, but first I wanted to go through them, pull the checks that I had written for the mortgage and taxes. I thought I should hold onto those. As I flipped through the checks, I saw a series written for a family member who had asked for financial help. I pulled those checks too. I added the amounts up. It was more money than I recalled giving. I put the checks in an envelope to keep.

“Burn that,” said a voice inside.

What?

“Burn it. You want to be free of family hurts, you need to burn that envelope.”

So there I sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, not totally onboard with the idea, and struck a match. I held it against the corner of the envelope lying on the grate. The flame took hold.

Perhaps that explains my reaction when my neighbor, in trying to be supportive, repeated my words that I was an outsider. I had already traveled far on the road to truth and healing, so when she offered a byway that would only take me back, I could see it for the temptation that it was and say no.

The process of claiming who I truly am is a long and winding road, but it is taking me home.

¹ Bryon Katie, *Who Would You Be Without Your Story? Dialogues with Bryon Katie* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2008), vii.