



Prefer Narratives with Hope

When Naomi Ceder was young, the narrative she saw about trans people was one of sickness, wrongness, and absence of hope.* The only way to transition was to renounce contact with all family and community. There was no way forward.

Over time, she found trans people who had an affirming narrative that included staying in contact with family and community. Now she had viable options and could move forward with a more gradual, connected gender transition. Our narrative about a situation controls the options we have.

Name the problem. When you have an intractable problem, look at the narrative around it. Analogies, metaphors, and narratives define the solutions we can imagine.

You might not have a narrative at all, just a nameless, amorphous unease. Being gay or trans can feel that way if available narratives only include cis straight people. An abuse survivor might feel that way before memories surface.

If you have a problem with no narrative, hold the question of what it might be. Sit with the unease, and with what you do know about the problem. Keep an eye out for clues. Find safe people to talk with who might help you name the issue. Once you have a name, you can explore further with internet searches and people who know about that topic.

It's not you. Often, an intractable problem includes the

* "It's not you, it's them: Reflections on being marginalized in STEM" by Naomi Ceder at Write/Speak/Code 2016.
<https://vimeo.com/176695137>

narrative that there is something fundamentally wrong with you, that instead of having a problem, you are the problem. This narrative and its shame might be invisible, like the air you breathe.

The first step is to notice a toxic narrative. You might arrive there through despair. When you have tried everything to fix yourself, exhausted defeat leads you to put down the shovel of self-blame and stop digging. You might arrive there by paying attention to beliefs that make you feel terrible, and deciding to choose new beliefs.

It can feel misleadingly powerful to label yourself as the problem and try to fix it. Unfortunately, you cannot fix what is not broken. When you name that the problem is external to you, you might feel helpless and overwhelmed. You might also feel relief, because you have shifted to being on your own side rather than attacking yourself.

You are not alone. When your narrative says that you are the problem, it also says that you are solely responsible for it, and maybe you should not even talk about it. When the narrative shifts to an external problem, it shifts from individual to universal. You have company and support, because many people are affected by the same external environment.

Being trans is intrinsic to the person, and not bad. The problem lies not in being trans, but in how society treats trans people. We can all work together to reduce anti-trans bigotry and improve resources for trans people. Trans people can share hopeful narratives of exploring gender expression and finding a good fit. For some, that includes the relief of taking hormones that feel congruent with their bodies.

Being abused is bad, and not intrinsic to the person. The problem lies not in being an abuse survivor, but in how society treats abuse survivors, and in the internalized shame

and victim-blaming that impede healing. We can all work together to reduce rape culture and victim-blaming, and improve resources for survivors. Survivors can share hopeful narratives of bearing witness to our truth.

“My body knows what to do.” During a rape or other assault, it is common for the body to freeze until the assault is over. This is a source of shame-filled narratives like, “My body betrayed me. I didn’t fight hard enough.” Similarly, it is common for trans people to stay silently closeted until there is enough safety (or desperation) to come out.

Try a new narrative: “I survived. My body knew what to do. Freezing is a completely normal response to danger.”

In an emergency, the body has powerful impulses to *do something*. We go into freeze as a last-ditch attempt to survive when the danger is too big and overwhelming, or our possible actions conflict with each other, or we have the habit of freezing from earlier emergencies. That powerful energy arises during the thawing and healing process, leading to the narrative, “I’m frozen. I have to do something!”

Try a new narrative: “Freeze is self-limiting. In a safe environment, all I have to do is let the freeze be there, and my body will come out of it in time.” It is normal to come out of freeze the way we went in, terrified or furious or desperate for help. With kind attention, the feelings will resolve.

Reach for hope. Whenever you find yourself thinking that you are crazy and wrong and bad, try a new narrative: “My perceptions and responses make sense. I am intrinsically good. I am doing my best with the resources and knowledge I have.”

Whenever you find yourself thinking that nothing will ever change, remember that “never” and “forever” are flashback markers. Flashbacks are memories that are frozen in

time. Try a new narrative: “Change is possible.” The present might already be moving toward the change you seek. You might make a new friend, read a new book or blog post, or find some other source of new ideas. A bigger shift might change everything. Allow yourself to reach for hope.

Naomi’s update. In 2020, Naomi Ceder reports that she recently completed three years as the chair of the Python Software Foundation. “That was a narrative option I didn’t have four years ago, being a trans woman leading the organization that manages the community of one of the top three programming languages on earth. I still find that somewhat incredible, but every few months I do hear from trans people (women and men) who tell me that my example has given them a narrative that they didn’t have before, and that it has helped them. And that makes me happy indeed.”

She notes that her story also resonates with cisgender women, perhaps as encouragement to find an alternative to society’s confining expectations. She continues, “It may also be that in a way my story affirms the value of being a woman – I would certainly like to think it does, and heaven knows I struggled enough to get there. It’s only implicit in that talk, but the other negative narrative I had to change to move forward was the misogynistic one I learned from society (my mother in particular, ironically). Reading and embracing feminism was a key component in my finding that narrative.”*

* Private communication, November 8, 2020, quoted with permission.