

Break Your Invisible Chains

Own The Power Of Your Story

An Active Guided Reflection Journal

Brandon Telg, Dr. Jaron Jones, & Carly Barnes

CHAPTER ONE: BABY ELEPHANT SYNDROME

Whether you've been to a circus with loved ones or seen a circus act on TV, I'm sure you remember seeing beautiful gigantic elephants performing tricks for the crowd. Children are laughing and families are enjoying themselves, but did you ever stop to think why these enormous animals stay within the confines of the circus tent? Elephants are built to uproot trees using only their trunk, yet these circus elephants never try to leave. Elephants in their natural habitat would break free from their bondage and roam as they pleased. So why don't these circus elephants simply walk out of the circus? It's not like anyone would be able to stop them easily. The reason why circus elephants don't escape is that they believe in false limitations. They believe in invisible chains.

This belief of bondage begins when these huge elephants are babies, barely able to walk on their own. Each circus hires elephant trainers that take these baby

elephants and systematically force them to believe that can never escape. To accomplish this, trainers will first take a baby elephant, when it is most vulnerable, out of captivity and into the circus environment. The trainer then takes a huge metal clasp and tightly closes it around the baby elephant's ankle. That ankle clasp is then affixed to a heavy metal chain, which is hammered into the ground using a thick metal stake. It is at that very moment that the baby elephant's instincts kick in. It tells itself that something is terribly wrong and it must break free. The baby elephant notices that it is attached to this contraption and tugs at the chain, panicking as it realizes it cannot escape. An instantaneous tantrum occurs because the baby elephant knows that this bondage is not normal. The baby elephant tries to run. But it can't. It gets snapped back by the chain. The elephant tries to escape again. It can't. The baby elephant knows it's not supposed to be chained down and that it is built to roam the lands. The baby elephant knows that the circumference of a circus tent is not where its story ends. So for two weeks, this baby elephant fights with all of its will, with all of its might, to escape from this chain, because it knows its truth.

After two weeks, this baby elephant becomes tired, frustrated, and defeated. Its will has been broken. With a bloodied ankle, this baby elephant now feels it can never

move beyond the distance of this metal clasp and chain. This baby elephant is stuck.

Fast-forward 10 years: this baby elephant has grown to weigh over 6,000 pounds. Even though it is a massive and majestic animal, the circus elephant forever believes it is trapped within the circus tent. Now the trainers only need to tie a small woven rope around its ankle, just tight enough for the elephant to feel its pressure. When the fully grown elephant senses this rope, it believes it is still that same baby elephant. It doesn't know that it can break free. The elephant is bound by invisible chains.

This story shows how in life, the stories people have imposed on us can bind us in invisible chains. We've all had experiences in our lives that have put a clasp on how we define ourselves. When someone else tells you that you can't do something and you believe them, they write your story for you. Believing someone else's story about you influences the actions that you take and where you see your goals in the future. What we have to do is learn about ourselves and become more self aware, more self observant, to identify these invisible chains so we can break free and live our best life!

The goal of this guided reflection journal is to help you break those invisible chains!

PROMPT: What do your invisible chains look like? What are some limitations in your life that someone else has set for you or that you may have set for yourself?

PROMPT: Who trained you? Where did your chains come from? (What have the people you trust in your life told you about yourself that may have given you limitations?)

Invisible chains are tricky because since we can't see them, they can echo in our mind even after the person or group that imposed those chains on us no longer plays an important role in our lives. For example, the parent who tells their child that the child has no chance at being a singer because he or she does not have a superstar "look," can create a mindset of failure in their child. He or she might think that they cannot succeed in their musical ambitions all the way into adulthood and beyond. Invisible chains can be broken, but you have to acknowledge that they are there, where they came from and that they aren't a valid reflection of who you truly are. Invisible chains can lead you into living what is not your most authentic life. Invisible chains can run deep. They can affect how you think about yourself, what relationships you forge, the decisions you make, and risks you take. What kind of reality do you build for yourself based on insecurities that someone else has shoved on you? Typically that reality is a limited one. The mindset might be that for some reason if you apply for that job, or if you move, or if you tell your dad how you really feel, or if you're in a friendship that's toxic for you, you have to re-experience that over and over again through your life. That's really what the invisible chain is. You're re-experiencing being chained to something, believing that's as far as you can go, and you

apply that to other situations in your life instead of realizing that you have the freedom to overcome and create a new pattern of positivity and self-growth. This is your circus ring. You can break your invisible chains to live your most authentic life.

To begin to break these invisible chains, this person whose dream it was to be a singer might begin to take vocal lessons or audition for a local singing group. There are many ways to break invisible chains, and often it comes with an action. For some, it's ending a relationship, for others it's apologizing, and for others still, it is starting a new job. The resources are there to break your invisible chains and take a positive step forward, but you must pursue them.

PROMPT: What resources do you need to break your invisible chains?

PROMPT: What are some tangible steps that you can begin to take to break those invisible chains?

Through *Breaking Your Invisible Chains*, you will be self-reflecting and analyzing your experiences as a story. You will be looking at your experiences to see what you have overcome and you will create a positive path into your future. You will express what you deep-down already know about yourself but have not yet put on paper. By writing your story through the prompts and questions in this book, you will empower yourself through your own story. You will break your invisible chains.

CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCTION OF STORY AS A SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

You can break your invisible chains. To be able to do this, you first need to know what these chains are and how they got there. To learn about yourself, you must engage in self-reflection. Self-reflection is deep thought about yourself, your past and your experiences. Different people self-reflect in different ways, but among the most effective methods of self-reflection is personal story development. When you look at your own life experiences and tell them as a story, you are processing your memories in an efficient and beneficial way. Humanity has used storytelling as a way to express experiences since the beginning of mankind, and stories are still how we most effectively share information with each other. Through the course of this guided reflection journal, you will not just be writing a story, but will also dig into your own experiences to be able to express something deep about yourself and your

life. After writing your story, you will be equipped with the tools to break your invisible chains.

THE RESEARCH

BY JARON JONES

Developing and sharing your story has a deep impact and a huge benefit. For my dissertation research, I examined how narrative approaches can enhance your self-efficacy and personal hardiness. Self-efficacy is your personal belief in your ability to create a positive change through stressful circumstances and situations. Personal hardiness is your ability to turn stressful situations into opportunities for personal growth. I studied students at the University of Florida in the leadership development program. I helped students develop their story, share it, and after, gauge their understanding of their ability to overcome stressful situations. On all levels of personal hardiness and self-efficacy, I found that there was an increase in each student's belief in their ability to create a positive change through stressful situations. By developing and understanding our stories, we get to turn perceived "weaknesses" into assets. I use quotations around "weaknesses" because when you come to understand your experiences differently, you see how when you've gone through a difficult time, one that could've felt crippling at the time, you are able to re-evaluate it when you develop your story. The mindset usually shifts through thoughts like, "Wow, I went through that? And I'm still here today? Clearly, I'm a very strong person who can do anything."

My research also showed and discussed how each student, in their story, could've taken two different approaches. They could've said, "Oh man, the situation that happened to me really had a negative

effect on my life," or "I could turn that negative experience into a positive." Relatedly, when you develop your story, you get to assign meaning to life events, which is empowering! It helps you to understand what you've already been strong enough to overcome and shows that you can overcome anything in the future. The extremely influential German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, "He or she who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how." When you understand your goals, or why you're doing what it is that you're doing in life, there's nothing you can't overcome to achieve those goals.

Finally, what I really love, is that when you share your story, you get to help others. In sharing your story, people are able to pull from your experiences and see life from your perspective. They can relate and see that they've had these same ideas, fears, hopes and dreams. It helps people realize they are not alone in their experiences. The author and public speaker Iyanla Vanzant says that, "When you stand and share your story in an empowering way, your story will heal you and your story will heal somebody else." Storytelling is a community development process, where we all learn and grow from each other's stories.

Meaning-making is the ability to connect one's experiences with meanings to describe the overall self. It has been studied and shown that people who are able to engage in meaning-making, tend to be psychologically healthy and generally happier and more willing to engage with, and try new things.

Your life story changes and adapts to the situations that

arise in your life, and so the meanings that you associate with your memories need to accurately change to reflect your changing experiences.

What memories, then, do you tie meanings to? There are many mundane memories in every person's life, so do we include doing the dishes and taking out the trash in our personal stories? No. The memories that are important are called *self-defining memories*.

Self-reflecting and evaluating our lives can be a tricky task. When one begins to actually sit and think about their story, they can often have a hard time knowing where to begin. It's easy to say to yourself, "There's just too many places to start. Do I begin in childhood and work my way forward? Do I start with where I am now and work my way back?" Clearly, there are many ways to go about this, but we find that it is often easiest to start with the question, "What was the moment when everything changed for me? There was a pre-me and a post-me after that event." You might already begin to see that this is likely your primary self-defining memory. We are able to recall these memories with a good degree of accuracy with little effort. Likely, having just read the question, a moment or two has already materialized in your mind. These moments are of such importance that they change the way that we view ourselves, others, or the situation that we are in. These are

the moments that make us who we are. These are the moments that our story is crafted on. When you have that particularly important self-defining memory as an anchor, the rest of your story will likely fall into place.

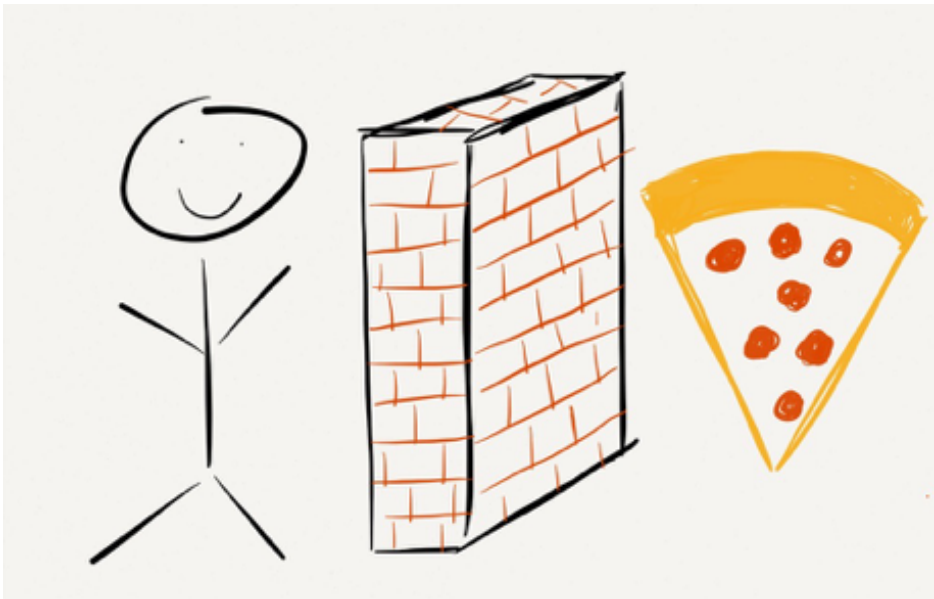
These moments can be times of great difficulty or wonderful opportunity. The birth of your first child, the failure of a relationship, the completion of college, all of these can be this pivotal moment for you. Let's say that graduating from college is your pivotal moment. What particular challenges did you face in your attempt to graduate? What did you learn through your time in college? What initiated your desire to go to college? How has receiving a degree affected your ability to achieve your goals? How have you grown through college? Starting at these pivotal moments, you are able to ask yourself questions about who you were before and who you have become since. This helps you flesh out your story with what details are truly self-defining memories.

A story is more than just a few jumbled-together words. There's a structure in every story that you've ever heard.

What is a story? A **story**, at its basic level, is told as a series of connected events that are either written or spoken. When you look at your life as a story, those connected events are the important moments in your life.

Every story can be broken down into three elements, no matter what story it is: **1. a character, 2. a conflict, and 3. a goal**. Let's take a look at *The Lord of the Rings*, for example. This is a long series of books and movies, but you can really break the entire story down to three elements: the **character**, Frodo. The **goal**, getting his ring into the fires of Mount Doom. Every event from the time Frodo gets the ring to when he throws the ring into the fire are the **conflicts** he overcomes along the way. When you think about your own story: **you** are the **character**, what you want in life are your **goals**, and every obstacle you've overcome, striving to reach those goals are your **conflicts**. Even if you haven't formulated your experiences as a story ever before, it is pretty easy for you to do so with this basic structure. If you identify what a goal is or has been in your life, from there, you can easily identify the conflicts that went into making that goal happen.

If you have never written a story before, it may seem like a difficult task. To show how easy it is to think in terms of character/conflict/goal, we are going to give you three elements right here: A stick-figure human, a brick wall, and a pizza. So we have a character, we have a conflict, and we have a goal. Using these three elements, write a story:



We asked dozens of people to come up with a story on the spot using these three elements. We were told fantasy stories, stories about the stick figure digging a hole, walking around the wall, scaling the wall, and everything in between. Every time, we still see a defined character, conflict, and goal. No two stories look alike, and that's amazing! It is likely that what you wrote involves the person attempting to get the pizza. That is a story with a character overcoming a conflict to reach his goal. When you take these story elements and apply them to your life as you self-reflect, you will be surprised how your story structures itself.

Why create your story?

Through creating your story, you develop emotional awareness, self-reflection, and personal growth. You discover how events in your life have impacted you, then you decide how those impacts will continue to affect you. What happened that challenged your path to success or happiness? How did you handle it? What lessons have you learned? Are you still learning? Questions like these help shape your understanding of your past and empower you to engage in your future. The key is that your values can inspire action through emotion. Learning to identify your values will help you bring about positive life changes. In

deciding how to move forward, you are able to break your invisible chains and forge a new path.

Through this journal you will break your invisible chains through the processes of:

Developing

To understand your life in a deeper, more meaningful way, first you need to understand it as a story. Have you ever thought of your life as a story? Creating your story helps you to understand your motivations, passions, and purpose.

Externalizing

Once you have created your story, growth comes from sharing it. Whether with one person or a group, a deeper level of understanding comes from the sharing of stories.

Internalizing

Use this greater understanding of your self to live the story that you want to share.

As you begin to craft your story, you want to answer three questions. (Don't worry, we'll get there in the next few chapters.):

