

NEIL PASRICHA

The *New York Times* million-copy bestselling author of
The Book of Awesome and *The Happiness Equation*

YOU ARE
AWESOME

How to Navigate Change,
Wrestle with Failure, and
Live an Intentional Life

SECRET #4

Tell Yourself a
Different Story

So.

I fell, you fell, we fell, now we're here.

We talked about the three steps you can take when the rug gets yanked from under you, when you slip up and trip up and feel like you're falling, falling, falling, falling.

I hope those three steps helped. Maybe you didn't hit bottom. Maybe you're back up already. Maybe you're good!

But we all fall all the way down dark holes sometimes, too. Sometimes we really are at the bottom. That's where we come face-to-face with our innermost demons. Our private fears. Our guilty thoughts. Our darkest secrets.

That's when we feel like we're at the bottom of a well. We can see the pinprick of light way above us, but our hands keep slipping on rocks covered in wet moss as we try to climb up the sides.

Then what do we do?

Let's talk about the next secret.

Let's get a little more intimate.

Let's go back in time.

It was October 1979.

I was six weeks old and I never stopped crying.

When I say I never stopped crying, I mean I cried all day and I cried all night. My parents had no other kids yet, but they knew something was wrong. They kept taking me to the doctor, but the advice was always the same.

“Don't worry. Go home. That's just what babies do.”

My mom was convinced there was an issue, so she took me to a different doctor who discovered I had a painful hernia and an undescended testicle. I was sent for immediate surgery.

“Will he be okay?” my mom asked the doctor before sitting in the waiting room and crying for hours while my screaming six-week-old body went under the knife.

I can't imagine how it would feel watching your baby taken in for surgery on his genitals in that emotionally vulnerable time a few weeks after giving birth to him. And I can't imagine what it would feel like for the baby either, since I have no conscious memories of it.

When I came out of the operating room, I apparently had no tears and no long-term issues, other than having only one testicle and a scar up my groin that would grow as I did. And because I was six weeks old, I never knew that had happened. My parents never mentioned it when I was a little kid, so I grew into a ten-year-old who thought all guys had only one ball.

Why?

Well, we have one nose, one mouth, one heart, one stomach, one belly button, one penis. There's a single-digit streak running straight down the middle of our bodies.

And as I think about it today, don't you think the human body is a bit strange with what it backs up with a second version and what it doesn't? Eyeballs? Sure, you're gonna need two of those. Get stabbed with a chopstick at a Chinese buffet brawl and you need seeing insurance. I get that. Nostrils? Two. Definitely two. Get a cold, and you need to breathe without your tongue hanging out like a golden retriever's.

Two lungs? Two nipples? Two kidneys?

Check, check, check!

But tongue, windpipe, stomach, heart?

Oh, one sounds totally fine.

So I thought my one ball was totally fine.

I lived without thinking about it in any way.

Remember: I grew up in the 80s.

There was no internet.

Ken dolls had no genitals. Cabbage Patch Kids had no genitals. He-Man had no genitals, though I bet he would have had huge balls if Mattel hadn't neutered him. (Think about it. The man rode a *black panther* like a carnival donkey.) Underwear models in Sears catalogues showed no discernable penis or ball outlines. Even detailed drawings of naked men, which I found one day in a copy of *The Joy of Sex* in a storage box in my basement, didn't have the testicular detail you might imagine.

Also, I wasn't looking.

I wasn't looking at naked men anywhere except in the mirror so everything made sense to me.

That all changed in ninth-grade gym class.

In ninth grade, I went to a large high school with a clear pecking order. Ninth graders were puny, had the worst lockers, and never got a table in the cafeteria. There wasn't a ton of pushing and shoving, but you knew your place and kept your head down.

Gym class was mandatory and I was assigned to the class taught by Mr. Christopoulos—a squat Greek caveman body-builder with short, curly hair, a unibrow, and a thick blanket of fur on his forearms. The man wore red Umbro shorts, a white T-shirt, and a whistle every single day, even in the dead of winter. He never smiled and was intimidating as hell. He might as well have ridden a black panther to class.

My gym class was made up of assorted 14-year-old nerds, hooligans, and punks, but nobody stepped out of line in his class. As if to cement his reputation, on our very first day, Mr. Christopoulos took our class to the weight room, where he invited us to show him what we could do. "Any of you bench-press? Go for it. See what you got." A few kids took him up on it, lifting the bar or adding a few light weights.

After everyone was done, Mr. Christopoulos lay on the bench himself and then kept ordering kids to "Add more weights!" until he was yelling, sweating, and lifting three plates on each side—over 300 pounds—while thick green-rivory veins bulged out of his arms and forehead. We stood in a circle around him with our

jaws dropped and our eyes popped like we were watching Big-foot give birth in a forest.

The message was clear.

This man would snap us like an Olive Garden breadstick if we so much as threw a paper airplane.

We fell into line.

Later in the fall, after a few weeks of weight training, track and field, and volleyball, it was time for health class.

Mr. Christopoulos took us to the music room and sat on the wooden conductor's stage at the front while the rest of us tilted cold metal music stands into desks and tried our best not to snicker when he started his straight-from-the-textbook sermon on menstruation, herpes, and AIDS.

Mr. Christopoulos was prone to lengthy asides where he'd wistfully tell stories about his days winning some European bodybuilding competition or pounding someone in a big wrestling tournament. Over time, our fear of him grew into a healthy respect and we started seeing him as the brawny big brother we all wished we had.

One day, Mr. Christopoulos started in on a story about how he was wrestling with a friend at a tournament when he had somehow managed to squash the other guy's testicle. Like, he actually popped the thing. The whole class erupted in deep groans and winces while Mr. Christopoulos just smiled silently, surveying the room, waiting for the noise to die down before delivering his big punchline.

"Yeah," he said, commanding every single eyeball for the big follow-up. "After that, we called him *half a man*."

Everyone burst out laughing.

The sound was deafening.

I was sitting beside a tall buzz-cut blond kid named Jordan who was my best friend in the class. He was slapping his music stand nearly crying he was laughing so hard.

“Half a man!” he screamed.

Kids had tears running down their cheeks at the one-two combination of the stomach-churning story followed by Mr. Christopoulos dropping his best joke of the semester.

I looked around the room and everyone was slapping their knees and tilting their heads backward while tears sprinkled off their faces.

And that’s how I found out I had one ball while every other guy had two.

I mean, it suddenly all made sense.

I’d always felt confused when guys said, “It hit me in the balls.” Why balls when there was only one? I thought it was just a weird figure of speech, the same way wrestling announcers say, “He got nailed in the breadbasket” or how people say, “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse” or whatever.

A stunning surge of feelings flash flooded my body. My innocent childlike acceptance of my body disappeared in a second. I suddenly had a physical problem. A big one. Right in *the very spot* where guys don’t want problems! It wasn’t like I had flat feet or a weird birthmark on my back shaped like Japan. I was missing a ball! I might grow up and have a high-pitched voice! I couldn’t play contact sports! I might never have kids!

According to my teacher and all my friends I was *half a man*.

I switched from tightie-whities to baggy boxer shorts. I carried a new dread with me every time I went to gym class. I changed facing the corner of the locker room.

When the internet was just starting up, one of the first things I yahooped was “testicular implants.” I discovered a world of guys who had had metal, marble, or silicone gel packs surgically implanted in their ball sacks for cosmetic reasons.

Can you imagine?

I mean, first of all, ball sacks aren’t generally on display. So nobody sees them except a couple dudes in the locker room and, you know, the love of your life.

Yet this is what we do.

We take what’s invisible to others and shine spotlights on it inside our own minds. That invisible feeling becomes the entire object of our internal focus, and it makes us stop thinking straight and seeing straight.

Half a man.

It played over and over like a bad song in my mind. It felt like a sharply intense liquid was soaking into my skin. I felt like a dry sponge dropped into a murky pond quickly filling up with cold cloudy dirty water . . . from all sides . . . all at once.

It took me a while to figure out the word for the emotion I was feeling. It was new, terrible, and dark, and it wasn’t quite as simple as guilt or embarrassment or fear.

It was something bigger. Wider. Deeper.

It was shame.

The swamplands of the soul

There's a gremlin waiting for us in cold, murky ponds.
 The Shame Gremlin.

Shame is at the root of so many stories we tell ourselves.

But what is shame?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls shame “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior.”

Mmmmm. No. Sorry, Oxford eggheads, but that's far too narrow. Time to go back to school and polish that up. Maybe get a degree from Cambridge or someplace. Because, first off, it's not just humiliation or distress, and it's also not always caused by wrong or foolish behavior, right? Shame can be caused by wetting the bed or not feeling skinny enough or walking away from a fight outside the bars. We can't say that is “wrong or foolish behavior.”

Can we find something better?

What if we ditch the dictionary?

Carl Jung once called shame “the swamplands of the soul.”

Swamplands of the soul.

There it is. Much better.

“Swamplands of the soul” doesn’t easily fit into a dictionary, but it works because shame is really so many emotions stewed into a big pot: humiliation, distress, worry, embarrassment, guilt, loneliness, and probably others we can’t even articulate. No wonder it’s so hard to talk about! That little smiley-faced emoji with the red, blushing cheeks is nowhere near complex enough to capture the swamplands of the soul, the dread in our chests, the murky water soaking into us that is so, so difficult to swim through.

The researcher and author Brené Brown calls shame “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”

We’re getting even closer now.

Can you expand on that, Brené?

“When you walk up to that arena and you put your hand on the door, and you think, ‘I’m going in and I’m going to try this,’ shame is the gremlin who says, ‘Uh, uh. You’re not good enough. You never finished that MBA. Your wife left you. . . . I know those things that happened to you growing up. I know you don’t think that you’re pretty, smart, talented or powerful enough. I know your dad never paid attention, even when you made CFO.’ Shame is that thing.”

Swamplands of the soul, indeed.

Who's really to blame in the shame game?

Look. Shame plays a role in how all of us think of ourselves. We keep our shame hidden. We awkwardly try to navigate around it. We cover up scars. We comb hair over bald spots. Buy thick-heeled shoes to look a couple inches taller.

We all do this.

We all do this.

We wrestle and navigate and worry and stress about our perceived imperfections. I recently walked by a tabloid blaring a headline about an A-list celebrity who weighs herself *five times a day*. The editors plastered that headline on there because we can all relate to that fear, to being so debilitated by the anxiety and self-consciousness and self-loathing jackhammering in our heads, whispering that we're not good enough, perfect enough, whole enough.

So how do we lose the shame?

How do we grow out of it?

How do we move past it?

We can't walk around it.

We have to wade through the swamp.

But it's not easy.

In his book *Overcoming Destructive Anger*, the psychologist Bernard Golden wrote, "Some researchers suggest that shame comes about from repeatedly being told, not that we did something bad, but that we *are* something bad. Shame, like guilt and embarrassment, involves negatively judging ourselves when we believe we've failed to live up to either our own standards or the standards of other people."

My wife Leslie tries to be careful about this with our kids. She never says, "You're so messy!" Instead, she says, "You haven't put your books and clothes away yet." She tries not to say, "You're so forgetful." Instead she'll aim for something like "You left your backpack at home today."

Shahram Heshmat, associate professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Springfield, researched addiction for more than twenty years. He said that "in order to experience shame, you must have self-awareness that others are making judgment."

Sounds sensible. Sounds logical.

When the other kids were laughing so hard about the "half a man" comment that they were slapping music stands, I understood pretty quickly that they were making a judgment.

But here's a detail that might be just as important.

What if it's not just others making judgment?

What if it's us?

Sure, it's easy to picture a scolding parent or nasty teacher as the enemy. A friend of mine still vividly recalls the angry face his father made when he wet the bed as a kid. And I remember

watching my seventh-grade teacher rip up a poor kid's spelling test after writing down O-D-J-E-K-T in big letters on the blackboard and asking the whole class what planet we all thought he was from since that's how he spelled "object."

We know those moments! They are the moments we can point at that create long-lasting shame.

But what if we participate in our own self-shame story, too?

How much do you blame others for your feelings of shame when the person actually internalizing, processing, writing, and repeating those is . . . you?

What story are you telling you about you?

What shame are you twisting into your brain all by yourself?

Research published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* states that "Shame is about how the 'self' views itself; that is, shame is not caused by concerns about others' evaluations of the individual." The researchers are suggesting that if you feel anxiety or worry about what other people think of you, that's actually a *consequence* of shame, not a cause of it.

What what what?

In other words, you wouldn't focus on how others see you unless you were already projecting some self-doubt and insecurities in the first place.

Let's go back to gym class.

Can we float above that scene and look at it again through this new lens?

While I was sitting in that classroom, I took the joke my gym teacher said and the laughs from my peers and crystallized all of it

into a clear, concise message that *I* internalized on the spot: “My balls are messed up. I’m never going to find a girlfriend. I’m never going to have kids. I have to hide this from everybody forever. In summary: I’m no good.”

I thought that! I’m not saying I got there totally on my own. What I’m saying is that I was an actor in my shame play. And maybe I had a lead role.

What story are you telling yourself?

Seth Godin is the bestselling author of nineteen books, including *Purple Cow*, *Linchpin*, and *Tribes*. He writes one of the most popular blogs in the world and routinely speaks at places like TED.

I sat down to interview him for my podcast *3 Books*, and we discussed *The Book of est* by Luke Rhinehart, one of his three most formative books.

The Book of est is a fictional account of the four-day, sixty-hour Erhard Seminars Training that was a popular new-age movement throughout the 1970s. Seth clarified that he doesn't subscribe to the cultlike aspects of the course or some of the nonsense spewed in the book. Still, when he read it, something in it hit him like a hammer.

He summarized the book's thesis this way: "Your problem is not the outside world. Your problem is the story you're telling yourself about the outside world. And that story is a choice. If you're not happy with the story, tell yourself another story. Period."

That simple. And most people will hear what I just said and not change anything.”

Is it that simple? Well, not always, but it can be. Because we often tell ourselves negative stories. We catastrophize, blame ourselves, wallow in our shame, tell ourselves we’re not worthy, and worse. We write a story where we’re the villain or the village idiot—or both. Why? Why do we dwell so much on the negative? Why are we so fast to judge ourselves so harshly?

If this sounds familiar to you, good. That’s a step. Seth recognized his tendency to make up negative stories about himself, and once he did, he realized that his story was imbalanced, maybe even self-harming.

How can we prove that?

Well, I’m guessing that you probably won the birthday lottery. If you’re reading this right now, you’re alive, you can read, you have an education. Did your parents give you food? And shelter? Did you go to college? Are you healthy?

We can keep playing this game to remind ourselves how good we have it. This helps us recognize that most stories we are telling ourselves are skewed.

Do you hate your stretch marks? Can you try to see them differently? Can they be timeless tattoos commemorating how you brought your beautiful children into the world?

Are you ashamed of your dozens of one-night stands? What if they helped you understand your own sexual chemistry enough that you knew what you needed in a partner?

Do you curse yourself over the extra ten pounds on your gut?

Can you instead love the fact that you have a weekly pizza and wings night with your friends?

We have to remember that *we retain the choice*, we hold on to the choice, we get to make the choice to tell ourselves a different story.

We can rewrite our shame stories, we can be gentler on ourselves, we can take the kindness we preach . . . and treat ourselves more kindly first.

Tell yourself a different story.

Tilt the lens

How does this work in practice?

How can we learn to see the shame stories we're telling ourselves and change them into something better?

We have to learn to tilt the lens. You need to tell yourself a different story. You tell yourself so many stories about yourself. You need to learn how to see the stories you're telling yourself from a new perspective. Through a new lens.

And how do we learn to do this? Same way we learn anything. Practice! Just plain practice. So let's practice together right now, and after that I'll share the three questions I ask to help my mind zoom out and reframe the shame stories in my head.

Here's a scenario we can use that I based on case studies in the book *Mindset* by Carol S. Dweck:

One day you go to your twelfth-grade chemistry class. You like the class, but when your test is handed back, you got a 65%. You're bummed. You tell your best friend, but she whisks by you in a rush somewhere. You feel brushed off.

Next, you head to your car to drive home and see you got a parking ticket.

How do you feel?

If you're anything like me, you're completely shattered.

What stories are you starting to tell yourself?

You're telling yourself, "I'm horrible at chemistry. I'll never get into college. My best friend hates me, and I don't know why. I'm so stupid that I parked where I shouldn't have. I am having an awful day!"

But when you look closer at the scenario, maybe you can start to see more context. Can you tilt the lens a bit? The chemistry test was just a test, not a midterm, not a final exam, not your final mark. How many classes have you taken where you bombed something along the way? I'm guessing lots. We all have.

What about your best friend? You feel brushed off because she was in a rush. You don't know why she's in a rush! Did she get bad news? Is she off somewhere important? Who's to say she wasn't rushing to class or had just gotten an important call? She didn't ditch you. She doesn't hate you. She didn't shove you or give you stink eye. Have you ever been in a rush when a friend or family member wanted to talk? Of course you have. We all have!

And the parking ticket? It's just a ticket. Your car wasn't towed. You didn't get into a crash. Who gets tickets? We all do. It's a money making machine for the local town. They got troops driving around just looking for wheels a smidge over the line or a meter that just expired. Ticketers gonna ticket. It's not a black smudge on your record. You're not going to jail.

And that's the point.

Our brains are so quick to adopt the view that the indignities we suffer are part of some grand plan to upend our entire lives.

But they're not.

All we need to do is learn how to tell ourselves a different story.

"I guess I should study hard for the midterm next week."

"I hope my friend is okay. I'll check in with her tomorrow to see if she needs to talk."

"Oh, they ticket right at three p.m. outside the school. Next time I'll put a little extra in the meter in case I run late."

Is it easy to tilt the lens?

No, of course it's not. It's hard! Really hard. It takes practice to learn how to tell ourselves a different story.

So what helps?

Three big questions to help achieve this secret

It's time for the three big questions.

These three questions help crowbar my brain out of the dark place it wants to nestle into and help me tell myself a different story. They work for me and I think they will work for you.

Here they are.

1. Will this matter on my deathbed?

I find this question helpful no matter what story I'm telling myself. And it's such an easy question to ask because the answer is almost always "No!"

So you had a half-dozen fender benders. Are you okay? Will it matter on your deathbed? No. It won't. Tell yourself you were just getting in some driving practice.

So you got fired. Sure, it's terrible now. But will it matter on your deathbed? No. Tell yourself, "I'm glad I had that experience, because now I'm better prepared to find a job I love."

So you mix up there, their, and they're all the time. So what? I do, too. Will it matter on your deathbed? No. Definitely not! Nobody will care about your grammar at your funeral. Least of all you! You won't really even be their.

Did you ever see the article in *The Guardian* about the top five regrets of the dying? Palliative care nurse Bronnie Ware witnessed thousands of deaths and shared the biggest regrets she heard. They were:

"I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."

"I wish I hadn't worked so hard."

"I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings."

"I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends."

"I wish that I had let myself be happier."

Do you notice anything about this list?

People on their deathbeds don't wish that they were prettier. Or that they had better spelling. Or that they had better abs.

They're looking back at their whole lives.

To soak up a lot of my shame about having one ball, I asked the question: Will it matter on my deathbed? The answer was a pretty clear "No." So I realized the shame story I was telling myself was really a choice. Proof? Well, here I am *shamelessly* talking about it.

Okay. On to question two.

2. Can I do something about this?

If you wet the bed as a kid and your father made you feel shame and you're still carrying it around, then sure, there are things you

can do about it: therapy, counseling, journaling, talking to a friend, sitting down to talk to your parents about it.

Get it out of your system.

But if you feel shame about your bipolar disorder or your miscarriage or your inability to grow a beard, well, you may not be able to change that thing. I'm not saying that solves the problem! I'm saying that remembering you can't control them should help. Why? Because you're off the hook. There's nothing you can do. Now you can tell yourself a different story to help yourself move forward.

So you lost your wallet? Instead of telling yourself "I'm an idiot for losing it! Somebody savage stole it! I'll never trust a soul again!" try "Well, maybe somebody really needed help to be that desperate. I hope my wallet helps them buy a hot meal or a bed for the night." Is that true? Maybe. Maybe not. But it could be. It adds perspective. And it's a story that will help you move forward instead of swimming—and sinking—in the deep.

Let's try a more heart-wrenching example. This one hits close to home. A few years ago, my wife Leslie had a miscarriage. We were devastated, and the stories we were telling ourselves were causing us even more pain. What did we do wrong? Who was to blame? Was it this fight we had, that thing we ate, that place we went? Then we started telling ourselves a different story: "The fetus wasn't developing properly and a body is smart enough to know when it's best to end a pregnancy." Did that tilted lens, this new story, take away all the pain? Of course not. It still hurt. Of course it did. But by telling ourselves a different story we moved

away from toxic self-blame—and it helped us slowly move forward and move on.

Maybe there really is wisdom in that old Serenity Prayer that asks God to grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Because when you ask yourself, “Can I do something about this?,” there are only two options, right?

If you can, well, hey, go do it!

If you can't, well, you can't. Why waste time worrying about things you can't change? I can't change having one ball, but I can do something about the story I tell myself. Leslie can't change that she had a miscarriage. But as a couple, we could choose to tell ourselves a different story that avoided endless wondering and finger-pointing.

And finally, question three.

3. *Is this a story I'm telling myself?*

Are you ready to get a bit meta?

Because this may be the biggest question of all!

This is about peeling and peeling and peeling away all the little stories we are attaching to the true facts in our lives. Because so often we're attaching stories to facts . . . *and we don't even know it*. Be vigilant. Search for absolute truth. Husk away all those mental attachments causing unnecessary suffering. Keep peeling and peeling and peeling until you find the solid and objective core, and then use that core to tell yourself a different story.

So I've got one ball. Some of you have one breast. Or one

lung. Or one leg. Some of you have anxiety or alcoholism or Alzheimer's. We all have something. The key to this question is separating what we have from what we attach to it. It's about finding the core fact and noticing that we're just telling ourselves stories on top of it. "I have one ball" is a lot different from "I'm disfigured with no chance of mating." The first is a fact. The latter is a story. "I'm an alcoholic" is a lot different from "My family will never trust me." "I failed my biology exam" is a lot different from "I failed my parents."

Those are the three questions:

Will this matter on my deathbed?

Can I do something about it?

Is this a story I'm telling myself?

It doesn't mean it's easy.

It just means that on our road to resilience, on our journey to awesome, on our path to getting stronger, we recognize there's an opportunity to be kinder to ourselves and we're able to use a few small tools to help us get there. Because the truth is that most of what we think is a story we're telling ourselves.

Only you can decide what story you tell yourself.

So tell yourself a better one.