

The Healing Power of Storytelling: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma, and Loss

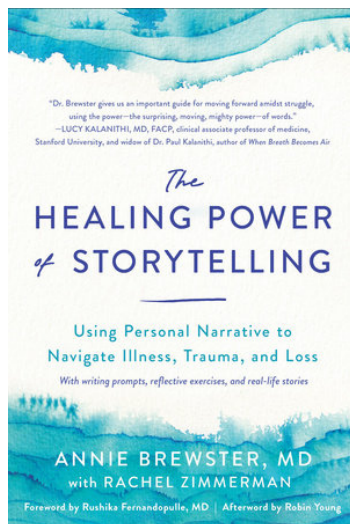
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Book Title : The Healing Power of Storytelling: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma, and Loss

Author: Annie Brewster, MD, with Rachel Zimmerman

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Dr Annie Brewster begins this beautifully raw and authentic read by sharing her vulnerabilities and struggles throughout her professional training to become a physician. She builds suspense and engages readers through her emotional shock when persistent personal symptoms lead to the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. In this emotionally charged narrative, Dr Brewster quickly connects with readers and shows them the benefits of sharing one’s story, challenges, and experiences in a push to take ownership, develop agency, and build a sense of self and community with others.

As Dr Brewster describes the initial diagnosis, she shares her first significant challenges: understanding, processing, and acceptance. Rather than acknowledge the disease, she chooses to deny it for many years until she is forced to seek help for worsening symptoms. This role reversal, from her training as a physician to the role of patient, brings an enlightening new perspective. She elaborates on her experiential learning of the concepts of illness, disease, and identity. “Embracing your illness as part of your story,” she states, “is essential if you are going to begin to heal and move forward” (p. 19).

Dr Brewster describes illness or disease as a state of imbalance in physical, psychological, or spiritual well-being. She articulates, down to a granular level, the basics of narratives and identity, which merge into the narrative identity—the internalized story of oneself, accompanied by a sense of purpose and unity. Illness easily can undermine one’s narrative identity, replacing it with concepts such as “the patient” and “the diseased person.” As a result of this identity shift, Dr Brewster—through her own story and anecdotes of others—shares with readers how feelings may surface, including shame, self-blame, guilt, and a questioned sense of self. These feelings often lead to patients hiding their diagnoses, fearing how to share their struggles, and dreading how others might judge them. As her writing progresses, Dr Brewster’s most extraordinary feat seems to be her ability to share her story and those of others to recapture ownership of the narrative identity, provide a deeper connection, and ascribe a sense of purpose, gratitude, self, and community.

Following her discussion of narratives, Dr Brewster continues to expand and discuss the profound difference between curing and healing. A cure implies the absence of disease. Healing, however, comes from ownership of one’s situation by confronting painful events and integrating them into the narrative identity, agency, self-acceptance, connection with others, and empathy for ourselves and others. Dr Brewster illustrates how healing is often possible when curing is not. “Medical care is often framed as a detective hunt, a mystery to be solved. When a diagnosis is reached, doctors experience a sense of closure. End of story. In fact, for the patient, the story is just beginning” (p. 28).

The audience is broad for this writing, holding pearls for physicians, patients, families of patients, a broader community of health care workers, and health care administrators. Dr Brewster successfully shows how the hunt for a diagnosis is simply the beginning of the patient’s experience. For physicians, she engages, empowers, and encourages them to

share their own personal vulnerabilities with patients (when appropriate) as one method of strengthening the physician–patient relationship. She reiterates how and why physicians should refocus on the goal of partnering in care and looking for ways to connect and walk with patients rather than trying to fix them.

Dr Brewster’s primary call to action for patients includes embracing their own illness and purposefully sharing their story in an effort to control the story rather than allow the story to dominate them. Multiple times, she shows how this approach provides many patients a profound sense of empathy, tolerance, new normal, and ultimately, healing. For health care workers and health care administrators, she demonstrates the patient experience through various health care situations and prognoses in an endeavor to elicit sympathy, empathy, and insight.

This beautifully crafted narrative repeatedly shows, rather than simply tells, how the medical community could look toward a patient’s strength, story, narrative identity, and healing rather than focus solely on a cure, disease, or defeat. Dr Brewster intricately demonstrates how sharing one’s struggles with others can promote a shift in perspective toward agency, ownership, and ultimately, health and healing, which makes the book worthwhile reading for those of any background or training.