

What Else Could Be True?

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Chapter One

The Story You Wrote Before Breakfast

*"We don't see things as they are, we see them as
we are."* — Anaïs Nin

Long before we speak our first words each morning, another conversation has already begun.

It takes place quietly, almost invisibly, inside our own minds.

We wake, glance at our phones, notice the weather, replay yesterday's conversations, and begin interpreting the world before we've even climbed out of bed. Most of the time we don't realize it's happening because the process feels as natural as breathing. Yet before breakfast, many of us have already assigned motives to other people, predicted

outcomes that haven't occurred, and reached conclusions based on remarkably little evidence.

We have begun writing stories.

Not the kind bound between the covers of a book, but the invisible narratives we create to explain the pieces of life we cannot yet see. These stories become so familiar, so quickly, that we mistake them for reality itself.

Perhaps you sent someone a text message the night before. Morning arrives, and there is still no reply. You unlock your phone, hoping to see their name at the top of the screen. Nothing.

The silence lasts only a moment.

The story begins almost immediately.

Perhaps they're upset.

Perhaps I offended them.

Perhaps they're avoiding me.

Nothing has actually been said, yet your mind has already supplied motives, emotions, and intentions that exist nowhere except within your own imagination.

Or perhaps you arrive at work and pass someone who usually greets you with a smile. Today they barely look up. They seem distracted, distant, perhaps even cold. Before the morning meeting has ended, you may already find yourself wondering whether you've disappointed them or whether something has quietly changed between you.

Again, no conversation has taken place.

No facts have been gathered.

Only a story has been written.

The remarkable thing is not that this happens.

The remarkable thing is how ordinary it feels.

A forgotten birthday.

A delayed phone call.

A shorter-than-usual email.

A spouse who answers with fewer words than normal.

A friend who seems preoccupied.

A stranger whose expression appears unusually hard.

Most of these moments are small enough that they barely register in our conscious minds, yet they often become the starting point for narratives that shape the rest of our day. Our thoughts rush to complete what reality has not yet finished revealing.

In many ways, this ability is one of humanity's greatest gifts. We are pattern-seeking creatures. We connect scattered pieces of information into coherent pictures. We recognize faces in crowds, anticipate danger before it arrives, and solve problems by drawing meaning from incomplete evidence. Without realizing it, our minds are constantly asking a quiet question:

What does this mean?

There is nothing wrong with that question.

The difficulty lies in how quickly we believe we've found the answer.

Very few of us are comfortable leaving uncertainty alone. We would rather hold an imperfect explanation than no explanation at all. The first interpretation that appears often feels convincing simply because it appeared first. Familiarity disguises itself as certainty, and before long we stop distinguishing between what actually happened and the meaning we've attached to it.

Someone forgets to invite us to dinner, and we conclude we've been intentionally excluded.

A coworker interrupts us during a meeting, and we assume they don't value our ideas.

A neighbor drives past without waving, and we quietly decide they're upset with us.

A friend cancels plans at the last minute, and we begin wondering whether the friendship means as much to them as it does to us.

If we slow down long enough to examine those moments, something interesting emerges.

The invitation was forgotten.

The interruption happened.

The wave never came.

Dinner was cancelled.

Those are facts.

Everything beyond them is interpretation.

Yet our hearts rarely recognize the distinction. We respond emotionally not only to events themselves but also to the stories we've constructed around those events. Our posture changes. Our words become guarded. We begin protecting ourselves from injuries that may never have existed outside our own assumptions.

Over the years, I've become convinced that much of the unnecessary conflict we experience doesn't begin with another person's actions. It begins with the explanations we quietly attach to those actions before we've gathered enough truth to understand them. We defend interpretations as though they were facts, protecting narratives that may have been written in seconds but continue shaping relationships for months—or even years.

Perhaps the most humbling realization is that while we are writing stories about other people, they are often doing exactly the same thing about us.

Every one of us is moving through life carrying an invisible manuscript. Every encounter becomes another page. Every misunderstanding becomes another paragraph. Without realizing it, we become both the author and the main character of stories that are still far from complete.

I didn't fully understand this until a lesson arrived from a place I never expected.

It wasn't in graduate school.

It wasn't during a leadership seminar or while studying psychology.

In fact, it happened years before any of those experiences, on a college soccer field where I thought I was simply learning how to defend against exceptionally talented players.

Only much later did I realize I had been learning something far more important.

The field wasn't teaching me how to anticipate an opponent's next move.

It was quietly preparing me to question the stories I would one day tell myself about other people.

And that lesson eventually led me to a question that has changed the way I understand conflict, leadership, marriage, friendship, and even my own heart.

What else could be true?

Why We Can't Stand Not Knowing

If the stories we tell ourselves are often incomplete, an obvious question follows.

Why do we write them in the first place?

The answer, I believe, is both remarkably simple and deeply human.

We don't like not knowing.

There is something about uncertainty that unsettles us. It leaves our minds reaching for completion, the way our eyes instinctively try to finish a familiar pattern or our ears anticipate the last note of a melody. An unanswered question lingers. A loose thread begs to be pulled. We are uncomfortable leaving empty spaces empty.

That instinct has served humanity well.

Imagine one of our earliest ancestors hearing movement in the brush just beyond the edge of a clearing. Waiting for complete certainty before responding might have been intellectually admirable, but it also could have been deadly.

Survival favored those who acted quickly. If the rustling belonged to the wind, they lost only a moment. If it belonged to a predator, that moment might have saved their life.

Our minds were shaped by generations of people who learned that swift conclusions often meant survival.

The remarkable thing is that while our world has changed dramatically, our brains have changed very little.

The dangers we face today rarely hide behind trees or emerge from tall grass. More often, they appear in the ordinary moments of everyday life—a delayed response to a text message, an unexpected tone of voice, an unread email, or the expression on someone's face as they walk past us in the hallway. These moments are not physically threatening, yet our minds respond to them with the same ancient instinct. They search for meaning before enough information exists to provide it.

We don't simply observe.

We interpret.

Imagine picking up a novel only to discover that every fifth page has been removed.

Most of us wouldn't close the book in frustration. We'd continue reading, almost unconsciously supplying the missing scenes ourselves. We would imagine conversations that were never written, infer motives the author never revealed, and connect events separated by blank spaces. Sometimes our conclusions would be remarkably accurate. Other times they would be spectacularly wrong.

Either way, very few of us would leave the missing pages blank.

Life asks us to do something similar every day.

We never meet people at the beginning of their stories. We meet them in the middle, often without any knowledge of what came before. We see a single conversation but not the sleepless night that preceded it. We notice someone's impatience without knowing they spent the morning beside a

hospital bed. We encounter another person's silence without hearing the difficult phone call that left them searching for words.

Every person we meet is carrying a history we cannot see.

Yet our minds quietly convince us that a single moment is enough to explain an entire person.

I have done this more times than I care to admit.

Someone answered me more sharply than usual, and I concluded they had become unkind. A friend seemed distracted, and I quietly decided the relationship had changed. Someone declined an invitation, and I assumed they no longer wanted my company. Looking back, I can see that I wasn't responding to what had actually happened nearly as much as I was responding to the explanation I had created.

There is an important difference between those two things.

One is reality.

The other is my interpretation of reality.

Confusing the two has caused more unnecessary heartache in my life than I care to remember.

Recognizing that truth was both humbling and strangely freeing. It humbled me because I realized how often my confidence exceeded my knowledge. But it also freed me because it reminded me that I wasn't obligated to believe the first explanation my mind produced.

Then I began noticing something else.

Those first explanations almost never felt tentative. They arrived with remarkable confidence, as though the case had already been decided before the evidence had even been gathered. They spoke with certainty, not curiosity, and because they appeared so quickly, I mistook speed for accuracy.

I would eventually come to think of those automatic explanations as **Story One**.

Not because they were always wrong.

Often they weren't.

But because they always arrived first.

And first is not the same thing as true.

That simple realization changed the way I approached difficult conversations. Instead of asking, *Why would they do that?*, I found myself asking a different question altogether:

What don't I know yet?

I discovered that those five words rarely gave me immediate answers.

What they gave me was something much more valuable.

They gave me time.

Time for another conversation.

Time for another observation.

Time for another possibility I had not yet considered.

Sometimes that was all truth needed.

It wasn't waiting to be invented.

It was simply waiting to be discovered.

The Lesson I Didn't Know I Was Learning

Looking back over my life, I've noticed that the moments which changed me most rarely announced themselves when they arrived.

There were no dramatic revelations, no unmistakable signs that I was standing at the edge of an important discovery. Life has never worked that way for me. The lessons that ultimately shaped my thinking almost always arrived disguised as ordinary experiences, blending so naturally into everyday life that I failed to recognize their significance until years later.

A conversation I nearly forgot.

A disappointment I didn't ask for.

A quiet afternoon that seemed no different from countless others.

Only with the perspective of time did I begin to understand that some of life's greatest teachers never introduce themselves. They simply wait for us to become old enough—or humble enough—to recognize what they were trying to teach.

One of those teachers was a soccer field.

During college, I spent countless hours playing against exceptionally talented athletes, many of whom had grown up in countries where soccer wasn't simply a sport but a way of life. Their skill amazed me. They handled the ball with an ease that made difficult movements appear effortless, and they possessed a quality that was almost impossible to describe until you experienced it firsthand.

They could make you believe something that wasn't true.

At first, I thought they were simply quicker than I was.

Whenever they attacked, I reacted to what seemed obvious. A slight movement of the shoulders, a

shift of the hips, a glance in one direction—
everything about their body suggested where they
intended to go. I committed my weight, planted my
foot, and prepared to defend what I believed was
coming.

A split second later, they were gone.

Not because they had outrun me.

Because they had outread me.

The movement I trusted wasn't their destination.

It was an invitation.

An invitation to believe the wrong story.

For weeks I assumed the solution was to become
faster. I trained harder, pushed myself more, and
tried to react more quickly than the player in front
of me. Yet the harder I chased the first movement,
the more often I found myself watching an
opponent disappear into open space.

Eventually, frustration accomplished something
that success never could.

It made me pay attention.

Instead of asking why they were so much quicker than I was, I began asking a different question.

What if the first movement isn't where they're actually going?

That single question changed everything.

Rather than reacting immediately, I began waiting.

Not for long.

Sometimes only a heartbeat.

But in that brief pause, something remarkable happened.

The illusion began to disappear.

I stopped watching shoulders and started watching the ball. I stopped chasing the first movement and started looking for the second. The players themselves hadn't changed, nor had my athletic ability improved overnight. What changed was my willingness to resist believing the first thing I saw.

Almost immediately, the game slowed down.

The same players who had repeatedly slipped past me now found me waiting where they actually intended to go. I wasn't anticipating better because I had become smarter. I was anticipating better because I had become more patient.

That lesson has remained with me far longer than any victory I experienced on the field.

Years later, I realized soccer had been teaching me something that had almost nothing to do with sports.

Life is filled with emotional feints.

A sharp tone of voice.

A forgotten birthday.

An unanswered text.

A hurried conversation.

A friend who suddenly seems distant.

Our minds respond exactly as I did on those soccer fields years ago. We see the first movement and immediately assume we know where the play is headed. We convince ourselves we've already understood another person's intentions before they've had the opportunity to explain them.

Looking back now, I wonder how many misunderstandings in my own life began because I reacted to the emotional equivalent of a shoulder fake.

How many relationships became strained because I responded to my interpretation instead of another person's reality.

How many difficult conversations could have ended differently if I had waited just a little longer before deciding what someone else meant.

Those questions are impossible to answer.

But asking them has changed the way I move through the world.

I've come to believe that patience is often misunderstood. We think of it as passive, as though it simply means waiting for life to unfold. My experience has taught me something different.

Patience is an active discipline.

It refuses to confuse speed with wisdom.

It chooses observation before reaction, understanding before judgment, and curiosity before certainty. It creates space for truth to arrive before our assumptions have the chance to take its place.

The pause I learned on that soccer field lasted only a fraction of a second.

In life, that pause sometimes lasts much longer.

Sometimes it is the length of a conversation.

Sometimes a day.

Sometimes several difficult weeks.

Yet the principle remains exactly the same.

The first movement is rarely the whole story.

And perhaps the first story isn't the whole truth either.

That realization quietly reshaped the way I began looking at people, conflict, leadership, marriage, and even myself. Before I reacted, before I defended my conclusions, before I allowed my emotions to carry me somewhere I could not easily return from, I found myself asking one simple question.

What else could be true?

The Story That Arrives First

For much of my life, I believed my greatest challenge was learning to understand people more accurately. I read books on communication, studied leadership, paid attention to body language, and tried to become a better listener. All of those things mattered, but eventually I realized I had been trying to solve the wrong problem.

My greatest challenge wasn't learning to read other people.

It was learning to question the first story I wrote about them.

That realization didn't arrive all at once. It emerged slowly, almost imperceptibly, as I began noticing a pattern that had quietly followed me for years. Whenever something unexpected happened, my mind seemed incapable of leaving it unexplained. It immediately supplied a reason, wrapped that reason in certainty, and invited me to begin living as though it were true.

Someone forgot to return my call.

"They must not care."

A coworker walked past without saying good morning.

"They're upset with me."

A friend declined an invitation.

"The relationship is changing."

None of those conclusions felt like guesses.

They felt like facts.

That, I would eventually discover, is what makes our first stories so persuasive. They don't announce themselves as interpretations. They present themselves as reality. They arrive so quickly and so confidently that we rarely stop to ask whether another explanation might exist.

Over time I began referring to that automatic explanation as **Story One**.

Not because it is always wrong.

Sometimes our first impression is remarkably accurate. Experience, intuition, and wisdom often recognize things before our conscious minds can explain them. This book isn't asking you to distrust every instinct or to ignore obvious warning signs.

Story One earns its place because it is where understanding begins.

The danger comes when we assume it is also where understanding should end.

I've noticed that Story One shares a few remarkably consistent characteristics. It arrives quickly, often before we've gathered enough information to understand what actually happened. It speaks with complete confidence, even when it possesses very little evidence. And more often than not, it quietly places us at the center of someone else's behavior.

Their silence becomes about us.

Their distraction becomes about us.

Their disappointment becomes about us.

Even events that have nothing to do with us somehow find a way into the story we've written about ourselves.

I've smiled at this tendency more than once, because it reveals just how creative the human mind can be. Give it a handful of facts and it will happily construct an entire novel. It invents conversations that never occurred, assigns motives no one has admitted, and predicts endings that exist nowhere except inside our own imagination.

The remarkable part is that our emotions respond as though every chapter has already been verified.

Our bodies tense.

Our voices become guarded.

We begin protecting ourselves from conclusions that may never have existed outside the stories we've created.

Looking back, I can see that many of the conflicts I once blamed on poor communication actually began much earlier. They began inside my own mind, long before another person realized a misunderstanding was unfolding. Two people could witness the very same event and leave carrying entirely different stories, each convinced that their version was simply an accurate description of reality.

Neither person intended to be dishonest.

Both were trying to make sense of incomplete information.

That realization changed the way I think about disagreement.

Many arguments aren't battles over facts.

They're collisions between stories.

Once I began seeing that pattern, I also began recognizing how easily certainty can disguise itself as wisdom. I had spent years believing confidence meant I understood someone clearly. In reality, confidence often meant only that I had stopped asking questions.

Wisdom, I've come to believe, is rarely loud.

It doesn't rush toward conclusions.

It remains curious a little longer.

It leaves room for another conversation, another observation, another piece of evidence that might completely change the picture.

Perhaps that's why the best editors never publish a first draft.

The first draft matters. Without it, there is nothing to improve. But every experienced writer knows the first draft is only the beginning of discovering what the story truly wants to become. They revisit it, question it, reshape it, and often find that the most important truths weren't visible on the first page at all.

I wonder if our minds deserve the same grace.

Perhaps Story One is simply the rough draft our brains produce while reality is still unfolding.

If that's true, then wisdom isn't found in pretending we never write first drafts.

Wisdom is found in refusing to mistake the first draft for the finished story.

That single shift has quietly transformed the way I experience the people around me. I judge more slowly. I ask more questions. I'm increasingly comfortable admitting three words that once felt surprisingly difficult to say.

I don't know.

Age has taught me those words are not a sign of weakness.

They're the beginning of understanding.

Because certainty has a way of closing doors before truth has the chance to walk through them.

Curiosity keeps those doors open.

And nearly every meaningful relationship in my life has grown stronger because I became just a little less certain...

and a little more willing to let the story continue.

One Better Question

The longer I have lived, the less convinced I have become that wisdom is primarily about having better answers.

I still value knowledge. Experience matters. There are moments when decisive action is necessary, and there are times when our instincts prove

remarkably accurate. But I've come to believe that the people who navigate relationships with the greatest grace are not necessarily those who possess the quickest answers. More often, they are the ones who have learned to ask better questions.

That realization changed something fundamental in me.

For years I thought maturity meant becoming more perceptive. I wanted to understand people more quickly, recognize hidden motives more easily, and avoid being surprised by disappointment. Looking back, I can see that I was pursuing certainty, believing it would somehow protect me from pain.

It never did.

In fact, some of my greatest misunderstandings were born from certainty. I became convinced I knew what another person meant before they had finished speaking. I assumed I understood their intentions before I understood their circumstances. By the time the truth arrived, I had already built an

emotional response around a story that existed only in my own mind.

What I needed wasn't sharper instincts.

I needed greater patience.

That distinction seems small until you begin living it.

Patience doesn't ask us to ignore our intuition. It simply reminds us that intuition is a beginning, not a conclusion. It invites us to hold our first impressions with open hands instead of closed fists, allowing new information to shape them rather than defending them at all costs.

Over time, I discovered that one simple question created that space better than anything else I had ever tried.

Not because it supplied answers.

Because it interrupted certainty.

Whenever I found myself rushing toward a conclusion—when disappointment, frustration, or

hurt began writing the next chapter before reality had finished the current one—I learned to pause long enough to ask:

What else could be true?

I have never thought of that question as an exercise in optimism.

It isn't.

It doesn't pretend that people never disappoint us. It doesn't ask us to excuse harmful behavior or ignore obvious warning signs. Sometimes our first impressions are correct. Sometimes someone really has acted selfishly, spoken carelessly, or broken our trust.

The question simply acknowledges something we often forget in emotional moments:

I may not know everything yet.

That small admission has rescued me more times than I can count.

It has reminded me that the impatient coworker may have received devastating news before arriving at work. It has helped me remember that the distracted friend may be carrying burdens they have not yet found the courage to share. It has kept me from assigning motives to silence, building walls where conversations were needed instead.

Just as importantly, it has changed the way I listen.

When I stop assuming I already know another person's story, I become genuinely interested in hearing it. I ask different questions. I notice details I would have overlooked. Instead of waiting for my turn to respond, I find myself wanting to understand.

That shift may be one of the greatest gifts we can offer another human being.

Not agreement.

Not advice.

Not immediate solutions.

Understanding.

Understanding rarely begins with certainty.

It begins with curiosity.

I've noticed something else over the years.

This question doesn't merely change the conversations we have with other people.

It changes the conversation we have with ourselves.

Instead of becoming a prosecutor searching for evidence that confirms my assumptions, I become a student searching for the truth. Those are two entirely different ways of moving through life. One defends what it already believes. The other remains willing to discover something unexpected.

The older I become, the more convinced I am that mature people are not distinguished by how often they are right.

They are distinguished by how willing they are to reconsider.

That kind of humility doesn't make us indecisive.

It makes us teachable.

It reminds us that reality is often larger than our first explanation, and that the people we love deserve more than our quickest conclusions.

Sometimes they deserve our curiosity.

And sometimes so do we.

The Most Important Story You'll Ever Question

For much of this chapter, we've been talking about the stories we write about other people.

Those stories matter.

They shape our relationships, influence our conversations, and often determine whether conflict grows or quietly dissolves. Learning to question those first interpretations has transformed the way I experience the people around me.

But over time, I discovered something even more significant.

The most powerful stories I had ever written weren't about other people at all.

They were about me.

Long before anyone else tells us who we are, most of us have already begun telling ourselves.

Sometimes those stories begin so early that we cannot remember life before them. A careless remark from a teacher. A parent who expected perfection. A friendship that ended without explanation. A failure that embarrassed us more deeply than we admitted. A rejection that lingered long after everyone else had forgotten it.

Moments become memories.

Memories become conclusions.

Conclusions quietly become identity.

Without realizing it, we stop describing experiences and begin defining ourselves by them.

I'm not good enough.

I always ruin things.

People eventually leave.

I'll never change.

This is just who I am.

The longer a story is repeated, the more permanent it begins to feel. We stop hearing it as an opinion and start accepting it as fact. Like a path walked through the woods year after year, it becomes easier to follow each time until we scarcely notice we're choosing it anymore.

I've walked those paths myself.

There have been seasons when disappointment became far more than something I experienced. It became the lens through which I interpreted everything else. A single failure convinced me I was failing. One painful chapter quietly whispered that it had already written the ending of the entire book.

Looking back now, I see how unfair I was to myself.

I mistook a season for a lifetime.

A wound for an identity.

An unfinished chapter for the whole story.

The same habit that led me to misunderstand other people had quietly taught me to misunderstand myself.

That realization changed something profound.

If I could question the stories I wrote about others, why wouldn't I question the stories I had been telling myself for decades?

That doesn't mean every difficult thought is false.

Some failures are real.

Some wounds leave lasting scars.

Some chapters are painfully difficult to live through.

Questioning our story isn't pretending those realities never happened.

It's refusing to believe they are the only truth that exists.

I've come to believe that pain is a remarkably persuasive storyteller.

It writes quickly.

It edits selectively.

It has a way of convincing us that today's struggle has always been true and always will be. It narrows our vision until one difficult experience begins to define an entire life.

But pain is not an objective editor.

It tells the story from inside the wound.

Healing allows us to read it again from a different place.

That may be one of the greatest gifts time gives us.

Perspective.

When enough time has passed, we often discover that what felt like an ending became the beginning of something we could never have imagined. The relationship that broke our heart taught us how to love more honestly. The failure we desperately wanted to erase redirected us toward work that mattered more deeply. The season we prayed would end became the season that quietly changed us.

Not because suffering is good.

But because growth often hides inside experiences we would never have chosen.

I've lived long enough to discover that life is remarkably reluctant to end where we think it will. Just when we're certain the story is finished, another chapter begins. New people appear. Old wounds soften. Doors we believed were permanently closed begin opening in unexpected ways.

I've seen that in my own life often enough that I've become cautious about declaring final endings while the Author is still writing.

Perhaps that's why this question has become so precious to me.

Not because it answers everything.

Because it keeps hope alive long enough for truth to arrive.

What else could be true?

Perhaps I am more than my worst mistake.

Perhaps this disappointment is not my destination.

Perhaps the chapter I'm living is preparing me for one I cannot yet imagine.

Perhaps the story I've believed about myself for years deserves another reading.

And perhaps the same grace I long to extend to other people is grace I must finally learn to extend to myself.

As I've grown older, I've become less interested in being right and far more interested in seeing clearly. Those are not always the same pursuit.

Certainty often asks us to stop looking. Wisdom invites us to keep paying attention.

That, I believe, is where transformation begins.

Not with having better answers.

Not with learning to think positively.

Not with pretending life is easier than it is.

But with the quiet courage to loosen our grip on the first story, trusting that truth is often deeper, richer, and more hopeful than our earliest conclusions.

This book is an invitation to make that journey.

One story...

one relationship...

and one question at a time.