After his deployment in Iraq, U.S. Marine Captain Tyler Boudreau returned home in 2004 with post-traumatic stress syndrome and an emotional war wound that experts now call a “moral injury”. He could only sleep for an hour or two at night. He refused to take showers or leave the house for long periods of time. He and his wife divorced. “My body was home, but my head was still there [in Iraq],” he recounts.

At first, Boudreau tried to make sense of his conflicted feelings by writing fiction. Then he wrote a detailed, nonfiction analysis of his deployment, but that didn’t help, either. In 2009 he wrote a memoir, Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine, that came closer to conveying his personal truth. “I needed to get back into the story,” he says, so he could pull his life back together in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Like Boudreau, we all have stories—ongoing and ever-changing—that we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives. They can help us heal and powerfully guide us through life, or just as powerfully, hold us back.

In 1949, Sarah Lawrence College Professor Joseph Campbell published The Hero with a Thousand Faces, in which he outlined a master monomyth. It involves leaving everyday life and answering a call to adventure, getting help from others along the way, facing adversity and returning with a gift, or boon, for ourselves and others. It’s a basic pattern of human existence, with endless variations.

Power to Heal the Body
How does telling our truth help heal our body? Professor James Pennebaker, Ph.D., chair of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, is a pioneer in the mind-body benefits of story, which he explores in Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions. In the late 1980s, while consulting for the Texas prison system, Pennebaker discovered that when suspects lied while taking polygraph tests, their heart rate rose, but when they confessed the truth, they relaxed.

“Our cells know the truth,” writes microbiologist Sondra Barrett, Ph.D., who also blogs at SondraBarrett.com, in Secrets of Your Cells, “Our physiology responds to what we’re thinking, including what we don’t want people to know.” When we are afraid to tell a story and keep it in, “Our cells broadcast a signal of danger,” she explains. “Molecules of adrenalin, along with stress hormones, connect with receptors on heart, muscle and lung cells—and in the case of long-term sustained stress, immune cells.”

We experience increased heart rate, tense muscles, shortness of breath and lower immunity when we’re stressed. She notes, “When we release the stories and feelings that torment us, our cells respond with great relief and once again become havens of safety.”

We need to tell our stories even in facing life-threatening illness, and maybe because of it. Dr. Shayna Watson, an oncologist at the Cancer Centre of Southeastern Ontario, in Canada, encourages physicians to listen to patients. “In the name of efficiency,” she reports in an article in Canadian Family Physician, “it’s easy to block out patients’ stories and deal only with the ‘facts’, to see the chat, the time and the stories as luxuries for when there is a cancellation. The study of narrative tells us, however, that in these easily neglected moments we might find more than we expect; there can be understanding, relationship building and healing—the elements of our common humanity.”

A current problem is but a dot on the entire timeline of a person’s existence. By keeping their larger story in mind, patients can find a wider perspective, with the strength and resolve to heal, while the physician can see the patient as a person, rather than a diagnosis.

Power to Heal Emotions
“Telling your story may be the most powerful medicine on Earth,” says Dr. Lissa Rankin, the author of Mind Over Medicine, who practices integrative medicine in Mill Valley, California. She’s tested the concept firsthand. “So many of us are tormented by the insane idea that we’re separate, disconnected beings, suffering all by our little lonesome selves,” she observes. “That’s exactly how I felt when I started blogging, as if I was the only one in the whole wide
world who had lost her mojo and longed to get it back. Then I started telling my story—and voilà! Millions of people responded to tell me how they had once lost theirs and since gotten it back.”

They did it by telling their stories, witnessed with loving attention by others that care. “Each of us is a constantly unfolding narrative, a hero in a novel no one else can write. Yet, so many of us leave our stories untold, our songs unsung,” remarks Rankin. “When this happens, we wind up feeling lonely, listless and out of touch with our life purpose. We are plagued with a chronic sense that something is out of alignment. We may even wind up feeling unworthy, unloved or sick,” says Rankin, who blogs on related topics at LissaRankin.com.

**Power to Heal a Family**

Sometimes, writing a new story can help keep families connected. Kansas City, Missouri, author and columnist Deborah Shouse took an unplanned and unwanted, yet ultimately rewarding journey with her mother through Alzheimer’s disease. Shouse discovered that as her mother was losing her memory and identity through dementia, crafting a new narrative helped her family hold it together, a process she details in *Love in the Land of Dementia*.

“You have to celebrate the person who is still with you,” Shouse says, noting we may discover a different, but still interesting, person that communicates in ways other than talking. She recommends employing a technique she calls The Hero Project, which she developed with her partner, Ron Zoglin. It uses words, photos and craft supplies in what Shouse terms “word-scrapping” to generate and tell a new story that helps keep the personal connection we have with our loved one and make visits more positive. She shares more supportive insights at DeborahShouseWrites.wordpress.com.

Sharing an old story may also provide a rare link to the past for a person with dementia. “Savor and write down the stories you’re told, even if you hear certain ones many times,” Shouse counsels. “By writing down the most often-repeated stories, you create a legacy to share with family, friends and other caregivers.”

**Power of the Wrong Story**

Our thoughts are a shorthand version of a longer life story, says author Byron Katie, a self-help specialist from Ojai, California, who addresses reader stories via blog posts at ByronKatie.com. Sometimes we tell ourselves the wrong story, one that keeps us from realizing our full potential, while making us miserable at the same time. Examples might include “I will always be overweight,” “My partner doesn’t love me” or “I’m stuck here.”

Katie’s book, *Who Would You Be Without Your Story?* explores how we often take what happens in our lives, create a story with negative overtones, believe that version of the story and make ourselves unhappy. “The cause of suffering is the thought that we’re believing it,” she says. By questioning our stories, turning them around and crafting new and more truthful ones, we can change our lives.

**Power to Heal the Community**

Humorist, speaker, and professional storyteller Kim Weitkamp, of Christiansburg, Virginia, knows that the power of story creates wider ripples. She sees it happen every time she performs at festivals and events around the country. “It is naturally in our DNA to communicate in story form,” she advises. “The power of story causes great revelation and change in those that listen.”

She cites supporting studies conducted by psychologists Marshall Duke, Ph.D., and Robyn Fivush, Ph.D., at the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, in Atlanta, Georgia. “They found that children—at ages 4, 14, 44 or 104, because we’re all children at heart—are more resilient and happy and rebound faster from stress when they know their family stories. They know they’re part of something that’s bigger than themselves that people in their family have kept going,” says Weitkamp.

“When people leave a storytelling event, they leave telling stories,” she says with a smile, “and that results in happier and healthier families and communities.”

Judith Fertig tells stories about food at AlfrescoFoodAndLifestyle.blogspot.com.
Write the Truth
James Pennebaker and fellow researchers at the University of Texas at Austin found that a simple writing exercise can help free people from emotional burdens, as first reported in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. Here’s how to apply it: Every morning for four consecutive days, write down feelings about what is bothersome:

- Something you are thinking or worrying about too much.
- Something you feel is affecting your life in an unhealthy way.
- Something you have been avoiding for days, weeks or years.

The idea is to write about the emotions that surround this thing you’re reluctant to admit or speak about. Pennebaker says it’s not necessary to reread what’s written or tell anyone about it. The simple act of writing down emotions surrounding a story begins the process of releasing it and relaxing.

Ask and Answer
Moving through the process Byron Katie calls “the work” uncovers the truth about the stories we are telling ourselves in order to create newer, healthier ones. First, think of a negative thought that’s worrying you, such as “I’m stuck.” Next, ask four questions about it.

- Is it true?
- Can I absolutely know it’s true?
- How do I react—what happens—when I believe that thought?
- Who would I be without the thought?

Now write down honest answers, which might be something like: “I’m not really stuck, I just think I am. Deep down, I know I have the power to move forward, but am unsure about the direction or way to go about it, so I feel anxious. Without the thought of ‘I’m stuck,’ I would feel freer to find a solution.”

Then, turn those thoughts around, for example, to, “Really, when I think about it, I feel much freer than when I deny or gloss over my erroneous thought.” When we turn around a specific limiting thought, we can experience the power of letting go of not only a misguided, but ultimately untrue internal story.