

# Change One Word

From "to me" to "for me."

I am a physician, not a psychologist or a licensed counselor, and this is education rather than therapy. Grief and trauma often need real professional help, and asking for it is preparation rather than failure.

The first three sessions were about the time before. You anticipated that hard things would come, you prepared for the ones you could name, and you gave up the idea that you were exempt. This one is about the middle of it, when the preparation is over and you are standing in the obstacle.

## Find your why

- Almost everyone starts at the same sentence: **why did this happen to me?** Read it slowly, because each word is doing damage.
- *Why* is the impossible question. It assumes this should not have happened and now requires an explanation, and the explanations available to a person in pain tend to be dark ones: that you are being punished, or singled out, or that the arrangement is unjust. People will offer you answers. I would not spend much time there.
- *To me* is the passive voice, and it puts you in the position of a victim of something conspiring. It is also usually the second question after the first one, which was: why am I not exempt? Nobody is exempt. That was the last session.
- Now change one word. **Why did this happen for me?**

to me → for me

- The sentence stops being a demand for an explanation and becomes an invitation to find a meaning. It also moves you from victim to student, which is a different posture entirely, and it is personal in a way the first question never was. Only you can answer it, which is the cost and also the point.
- Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist deported with his wife, parents and brother in 1942. What he observed in the camps was that the people who found a meaning in their suffering were the ones more likely to survive it, under conditions designed to make meaning impossible.
- His three claims, stripped down. **Freedom of will:** you choose your attitude and response to any circumstance, including circumstances you did not choose. **Will to meaning:** the primary human motivation is not pleasure or power but the search for meaning. **Meaning of life:** meaning can be found in any moment, and finding it is your job.
- Frankl's sharpest line is the one that turns the question around. Ultimately a person should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but recognize that it is he who is being asked.

The answers vary, and in practice they cluster. A greater purpose, whether faith, principle, country, or work. Love for a particular person. Courage, which is mostly the willingness to keep going. Being refined by it. Learning compassion, which is the reason the person who has been through a thing can reach someone that nobody else can reach. Being an example, which is the least comfortable one on the list and often the truest.

## Every story you already know has this shape

- Joseph Campbell studied myths across cultures and found one recurring structure: a call to leave the ordinary world, a threshold crossed, trials and allies, then the abyss, the worst of it, followed by transformation and a return carrying something useful.
- You know it without being taught. A farm boy leaves for a war he did not start and comes back something else. A hobbit carries a burden to a mountain and saves a country he will not get to enjoy. An orphan walks into a forest to meet the thing that has hunted him his whole life. In every case the mentor appears, the helpers matter, and the boon at the end is usually for other people.
- It is not only fiction. The same shape carries the oldest stories any culture keeps: the favored son sold into slavery who ends up feeding the family that sold him; the prince who becomes a fugitive and comes back as a liberator; the blameless man on the ash heap whose friends make it worse and who ends up praying for them.
- Campbell's line is the one to keep: **the cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.**
- Which gives you two questions with real teeth. What is my cave, and what is my dragon? And if I were the hero of this story rather than its victim, how would I respond to this?

Notice what this actually is. Reframing is a mental skill, not a mood, which means it can be practiced and it improves. Nobody does it well the first time, in the first week, about the worst thing that has happened to them.

## Seek acceptance

- This part is work and it takes time, sometimes a great deal, and often help. Acknowledge what is real, including the emotions, because suppressing them only delays the thing. Let the pain be pain; it is a normal response, not a malfunction. Give yourself room to process without judging yourself for how long it takes.
- Then accept, which is the hard word. Not approval, and not agreement. Just: this is the hand. However much you did not want it, this is what is on the table.
- The stages people quote, denial and anger and bargaining and depression and acceptance, came from observing terminally ill patients. They are a description, not a schedule, and grief does not owe you an order or a deadline.
- Without acceptance you stay exactly where you are. You took a wrong turn on the motorway, and instead of driving on to the next exit you have pulled onto the shoulder and stopped, because it feels like you should be able to go back. There is no back. There is only forward from here.

**suffering = pain + non-acceptance**

You cannot subtract the pain. But to the degree that you need something to be different that cannot be different, you are manufacturing the rest yourself. Frankl again: in some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning.

## Finish the story

- A farmer's horse ran off. What a tragedy, said the neighbors. Maybe yes, maybe no, said the farmer. The horse came back with six wild ones. What a blessing. Maybe yes, maybe no. His son broke his leg breaking one of them. What a tragedy. Maybe yes, maybe no. The army came through conscripting every young man in the village, and his son was not taken.
- You are almost never at the end of the story, and you are certainly not at the end while it still hurts. Things that looked like obstacles at the time turn out often enough to have been the route.
- There is also a case for fighting. Not everything should be absorbed calmly. Some adversity is an invitation to bring your best game rather than to endure gracefully, and the answer to a setback can reasonably be: good. Good, that means I have to get better at this. Good, that is more repetitions. Good, now I have a reason to study.
- The word itself is a tool. A former special forces officer built a following on a single syllable: whatever the setback, the answer is good. Mission cancelled? Good, more time to prepare. Lost a promotion? Good, more experience before the responsibility. Injured? Good, time to fix the thing you were neglecting. It sounds glib on paper and it is not, because it forces the mind past the complaint and into the next move, which is where you were going to have to be anyway.
- And you can change what your own body is telling you. Your heart pounds and your breathing quickens and you have been taught to read that as panic. It is also exactly what preparation looks like from the inside: blood and oxygen moving to where you need them. When people are taught to read the racing heart as readiness rather than alarm, they do not merely report more confidence. Their blood vessels behave differently, closer to the pattern seen in courage than the one seen in threat. Same body, same stress, different story, and the story reaches all the way down.

## Explanation is not meaning

- These are constantly confused and they are not the same thing. An **explanation** is a causal account of why an event occurred, and for most serious adversity there either is not one or it is not available to you. **Meaning** is what the event is going to be for, and it is constructed rather than discovered.
- That distinction is why the advice to stop asking why is not defeatism. You are being told to abandon a question with no answer in order to take up one that has several, all of which are yours to write.
- It also explains why other people's attempts to explain your suffering land so badly. They are answering the question you gave up, usually badly, and usually in a way that implies you earned it.
- Expect it to take longer than you want. Help of any kind, practical or otherwise, tends to arrive late in the story rather than early, after you have already done everything you could think of. That is maddening while it is happening and it is also, looking back, generally when people say they changed.

## Where this can go wrong

- **Too early.** Handed to someone in the acute phase, "why did this happen for you" is not comfort, it is a demand. Meaning is found afterward and often long afterward. The right thing to offer a person in the middle of it is presence, not a frame.

- **Aimed at someone else.** This is a question you ask about your own life. Applied to another person's tragedy it becomes an explanation for their suffering, which nobody asked you for and which is rarely received the way it was meant.
- **Used to skip the grief.** Reframing is not a way around acceptance, it is what becomes available after it. Rushing to a meaning is one of the more sophisticated ways of refusing to feel the thing.
- **Turned into a verdict.** "Everything happens for a reason" and "why did this happen for me" are not the same sentence. The first assigns a cause and closes the question. The second assigns you the work and leaves it open.

### TRY THIS

- Name one hard thing from this year, plainly, without softening it.
- Ask why it happened for you, and write the answer down rather than thinking it.
- Ask what you can learn, and how this obstacle could become the route.
- Name the part you have not yet accepted, and say so out loud.
- The next time something goes wrong, try saying good, and then go looking.

You do not choose the moment. You do choose what it means. Frankl again: what is to give light must endure burning.

## Resources

### Three people worth reading on this

- **Noland Arbaugh**, paralyzed in a diving accident, later the first person to receive a Neuralink implant. On his own account the adversity gave him a way to reduce someone else's suffering, a reason to look for God, a contrast that made the light legible, and a sharper sense of what he still has.
- **Beck Weathers**, left for dead twice on Everest in 1996 and who walked into camp on his own. What he took from it was a reordering of what actually mattered, and he has been unusually honest about what preceded it.
- **Chris Williams**, who lost his wife, his unborn child and two of his children to a drunk driver, and publicly forgave the teenager responsible almost immediately. His account is about love, example, and what he believed he was for.

### Questions for finding your own why

- Why did this happen for me?
- What can I learn from it?
- How could this become the way forward?
- What is my cave? What is my dragon?
- Who can help me with this part?
- What have I not accepted yet?

### Reading

- *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl. If you read one book from this entire course, read this one.
- *Left for Dead*, Beck Weathers. Everest, and the harder part afterward.
- *Let It Go*, Chris Williams. Forgiveness after a loss most people cannot imagine surviving.
- *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell. The structure underneath every story you already know.

Theme: adversity. From my course *Life's Obstacles*. The companion sessions are on mindset, preparation, and expectations.