



Defining Moments Your own 'Angels and Demons'

When I was six, I was one of those painstakingly conscientious children. I was very big on correctly-drawn margins, neat handwriting and being in the right place at the right time, in the correct uniform. For some reason, I was afraid of not following the instructions properly, even though I almost always did, so I'd listen to them twice as hard.

The girls in Year Two were in the habit of tracing patterns on each other's backs with our fingers whenever we gathered in a group on the floor of a classroom. The teachers didn't seem to mind, and we had all sorts of rhymes and games based around it – guessing the word or letter that was being drawn, or which finger came last in a play that went, 'five little fingers on your back, which one will I choose...'

It seemed perfectly reasonable for me to ask a red-headed, freckly girl named Kylie to draw on my back during assembly one day. I remember sitting there, guessing the letters, listening to the teacher, loving school as usual – loving my whole life, in fact – and then disaster struck.

The school principal asked Kylie to stop doing it. Kylie explained that I had asked her to do it. I panicked and denied it, so the two of us were marched out of assembly and sent straight to the principal's office where we were instructed to think about what we had done and work out whose fault it was.

I was deeply, *deeply* mortified. Up until this moment, I hadn't put a foot wrong at school. Not a *toe* wrong. The only time I had spent in the Principal's office had been to collect special awards or to offer to be a helper of some sort. Suddenly, I had done something so terrible that I was called to face the principal with an explanation for my undeniably bad behaviour. Almost nobody was sent to the office during assembly. Not even the naughtiest boy in class. And here I was - an example made of me in front of the whole school, for all the wrong reasons.

I was not this kind of girl!

However this event might appear in hindsight (I was in the wrong but, as bad behaviour goes, it's not necessarily in the league of deliberately throwing a rock through the window of the principal's car, like my colleague's son did the other day), this was nevertheless a defining moment for me as a child. A defining 'demon'. During this one, unexpected snapshot in time, my self-belief shifted from: 'I am a good girl' to: 'I failed.' I was so ashamed about what had happened, and the manner in which it was amplified, that I gave the event immense significance, didn't tell my parents about it, and prayed they wouldn't find out.

Fast-forward twenty-five years and I ran into the same school principal at a dinner where my husband was the guest speaker. She was thrilled to see one of her former students all grown up with a family of her own and, amongst other things, I reminded her of the 'lying incident' from Year Two. Naturally couldn't recall it, although she did tell my husband that she remembers me as a good girl who *never put a foot wrong*.

And there was another defining lesson – an 'angel moment' this time. I'd been in the wrong that day, no question, but I'd also blown it out of all proportion. So had the teacher, in all likelihood. She was probably having a bad day. Seeing these kids doing something distracting in assembly may have been the last straw. But how was my six-year-old self to have known this?

Another defining experience for me was in Year Six, when I experienced a prolonged episode of bullying. It began when we were asked by the school secretary to state, in front of the class, which high schools we were planning to attend. I happened to be attending a different one from most of my peers, which my two best friends teased me about.

It wasn't long before the teasing grew into relentless ridicule and isolation, (bullying behaviour that apparently continued after we left primary school, with two of the high school 'victims' of the same bullies winding up in psychiatric care because of it, in their early teens.)

At the age of eleven, I could have given this experience one of several possible meanings. I could have chosen any of these 'demons':

'I am unlikable'

'I am friendless'

'I am not worth knowing'

Instead, (thankfully) I saw it for what it was – unjustified cruelty – and I chose to believe that 'I am a strong person. I can get through this'.

I did get through it. Afterwards, every time I encountered a challenge in my life, I remembered the bullying and the 'angelic' belief that 'I am a strong person, I can get through this'. Fifteen years later, during the agony of childbirth, I remembered it. (After childbirth, I modified this belief slightly: I am a strong person. I can get through anything!)

Now, when I face something difficult or nerve-wracking (a job interview, a difficult conversation, an intimidating audience, a particularly tough workout or something really hard, like my divorce several years ago), I call on my proven belief that I am a strong person who can get through anything. By connecting the dots between adversity and this belief that I can overcome it, I find a well of extra strength that never lets me down.

In another serendipitous opportunity for closure, several years after I was bullied I met up again with the girls who had bullied me. By this stage, I was pretty confident in my own identity. I had found some wonderful friends in high school, who are my closest friends to this day, and I didn't need any extra approval, least of all from these girls. I also didn't need to make amends for the way they had treated me (largely because I avoided conflict at all costs!) Nevertheless, one of the girls said these exact words to me, which I have never forgotten: 'We thought you would change when you went to that school, but you haven't. You are one of the nicest people I think I have met.'

Hearing this from that particular person was another angelic defining moment in my life, not because of the compliment itself, but because it made me see what a close shave it had been. What would have happened if, back when the bullying occurred, I had chosen to ascribe a 'demon' belief to it. What if I had believed 'I am unlikable' instead of 'I am strong'? How unnecessarily self-destructive would that have been?

These are just a couple of examples of the kinds of events that I worked through when I completed the following exercise*. Before a defining moment occurred, I was a person who believed X about myself and the world around me. After this event, I believed Y. These moments define – or re-define – our outlook.

You now have an opportunity to isolate your own defining moments – your ‘angels’ and your ‘demons’. I want you to take these incidents from your past and trap them in headlights. Hold them up to your adult scrutiny and decide whether your beliefs are really justified. This is an opportunity to ‘accentuate the positive’ and let go of the negative. It can be a liberating experience.

The exercise can raise some emotional memories, and is best done in a comfortable, quiet, ‘thinking space’ where you can be free of interruptions for an hour or so. You will need a pen and your journal or notebook. Turn off your mobile phone and email, and take the landline off the hook. Give yourself this time.

Angels and Demons Exercise

There are no right or wrong answers here. What feels important to you is important: full stop. You do not need to share this with anyone unless you want to.

Step One – identifying your defining moments

Think about a defining moment in your life, in as much detail as you can remember. If it helps to stimulate your memory, think of the various stages in your life:

- 1-5 years old
- 6-12 years old
- 13-20 years old
- 21-35 years old
- 36-50 years old
- 50+

About the defining moment, ask yourself the following questions and write down as much detail as you can:

Back then:

- How old am I?
- What happened to me that was so significant?
- Who was there? Who should have been there?
- What was said?
- How did I feel? What emotions did I experience?
- What did I wish was different? (How would I re-write history, if I could?)
- *At the time*, what did I say to myself as a result of this? What was my new belief?

And now:

- In relation to this event, how do I feel now?
- What emotions still come to the surface?
- If it was a negative experience, what power, or self-determination, if any, did I lose as a result of this event?
- If it was a positive experience, what did I learn or gain, from this?

Repeat this process, until you have a list of defining moments from your life. Have you included everything that should be there? Good and bad?

Step Two – identifying your beliefs

Go back through your list and think about the following, for each defining moment:

- Before this happened, I believed X about myself/others/the world.
- After this happened, I believed Y about myself/others/the world.

Now, for the grown-up part...

Step Three

Look at the meaning that you have ascribed to each event in Step Two. These are the beliefs that you formed around each experience.

Ask yourself:

- With the benefit of time, objectivity and perspective, does the belief that I held stand up? Does it make sense? Is it real, or is it the belief of a well-meaning child who didn't know better?
- Does the belief support, sustain and nurture me now, as an adult?

Take a pen and circle the beliefs that are worth keeping. Be ruthless with this – the rule is that you may not circle anything that does not support, sustain and nurture you.

Sometimes, particularly if you are not used to being this kind to yourself, this can be quite challenging. If it helps, imagine that you are choosing this set of beliefs to give to a loved one, or to a child.

You want the best for them. What would you want them to believe about themselves?

Of the beliefs that you have not circled, is there anything that you could still learn from, change or turn around to make a positive? Could you review anything, adding in your adult perspective, and make it work for you?

By now you ought to be forming a list of strong, self-serving, positive ideals about yourself: a new code for you to live by.

You may also have a list of beliefs that are not circled - long-held, limiting beliefs that have been holding you back. It is time to let these go.

Look at those negative beliefs. Acknowledging that they may have been entirely true for you when you were six, or nine or thirteen or twenty-one, see that they do not hold up any more, now that you are older. Their use-by date has long expired.

What do you do with negative beliefs like this? A coach I know loves to say to her clients: 'throw it overboard and feed it to the sharks.'

Feel the liberation of doing this.

Conclusion

To end this exercise and reinforce it in your mind so that you can use it to create positive changes in your life, turn to a brand new page.

You have selected only those beliefs that serve and sustain you, and have discarded those that do not.

Write down the beliefs that you now choose to live by.

In order to reinforce your new patterns and choices, ask yourself this: what price will I pay if I don't accept and reinforce these new beliefs? What price will I pay in terms of how I feel about myself? How I feel about others? How I feel or act in my relationships, career or business?

What will I be giving up if I don't create this change?

What do I have to gain by adopting these new beliefs?

And, finally, what can I do to reinforce my new beliefs? (eg. tell someone I trust about this change, stick a reminder on my bedroom mirror, keep a journal of how these beliefs change my life etc.)

Choose to move on now from your past, using this new, positive blueprint for your future.

*This exercise adapted from an exercise in 'Self Matters' by Phil McGraw and material by Sharon Pearson, from The Coaching Institute