

Once Upon a Time...

The healing power of storytelling

By Cathy Conheim, MA, LCSW

Storytelling connects us to one another and to what is important in our lives. Using the voice of Henry, a three-legged cat, Cathy Conheim employs storytelling to help children and adults find new ways of coping with challenges and emotions. Henry teaches us that we are not defined by our circumstances and that each of us is capable of contribution, creativity, and the courage to be "Just Me."

Following Henry's example, children (and grown-ups) can learn to tell their own stories as they discover a new vocabulary for self-expression. As they become aware of the impact of emotions, they also learn how important it is to choose their responses to challenging experiences. We ask our military to be our heroes; Henry's story helps us recognize the hero within all of us.

It was a beautiful day! I was running around chasing leaves and dodging in and out around trees with my three sisters. Life was good. Suddenly there was a great THUD. I don't have much memory of what happened until I woke up. My left paw was dangling, and I couldn't walk when my human mom found me. Of course, she didn't know she would become my mom. She thought she hated cats! Fortunately, she had a tender heart and scooped me up and took me to a white coat person for animals.

My life was saved, but now I have only three legs.



Life has changed so much from what I expected it to be... I am no longer allowed to run free outdoors. My family says I might be eaten by a coyote or climb a tree and not be able to get down. Humans, they worry about so many things! We animals just go on with what we have, even though humans seem to notice what is missing. I've learned that hard things happen, but it's how we respond that really matters.

At first I was so overwhelmed by my new world that I hardly knew what to do. So, I asked my new mom if she would help me write my story and reach out to others who are hurting. I wrote my first letter in 2004; Mom sent it to 20 of her friends. They sent it on to lots of other people and soon I was getting letters from all over the world.

When I first got hurt, I just wanted to curl up and stay in a dark place by myself. But once I started telling my story, I made new friends. Now I want to help others tell their stories, share their feelings, and tell what their lives are about. None of us can manage things we can't mention, so I talk about all sorts of things. Animals and humans write back and tell me their stories.

"Everyone's life deserves a book and each of us should be the leading character in our own story." ~Henry~

I now have thousands of friends and paw pals. In the last four years, I have answered almost 40,000 letters. Through my letters, I can take different journeys than my legs used to take me on. My friends have told me much about their challenges and their losses, and some have even said I am a good role model for them. I have learned that none of us is defined by our circumstances, and each of us can contribute to the lives of others.

Some of the people who write to me are military families. They have told me of their brave humans who sometimes go halfway around the world to fight for the freedom of other people. I learned that humans don't always get along and they have big things called wars to try to settle their differences. When the brave people go off to this thing called war, families are left behind waiting for someone to come home.



The littlest soldiers, the children, hurt the most. Like me, they don't understand why their mother or father or sister or brother has to go so far away.

The hardest thing I have learned is that some humans in the military don't ever come home again. They don't get a second chance like I did. They go over the rainbow bridge where things are more peaceful, but their family is left on this side to cope with all the sadness, confusion, and pain. The families have to find a way to keep going when there is a big hole in all of their hearts, and they have to find a way to live in this new world they find themselves in.

With the help of my mom, I've written a book called *What's the Matter with Henry, the True Tale of a Three-Legged Cat*. I went to Camp Pendleton and other bases and took my books to the families of our service people. There were five really important things that I wanted to tell them:

1) Hard things happen. It is not the events of our lives that cause us to be who we become; it is our responses to those events. WE get to choose our responses.

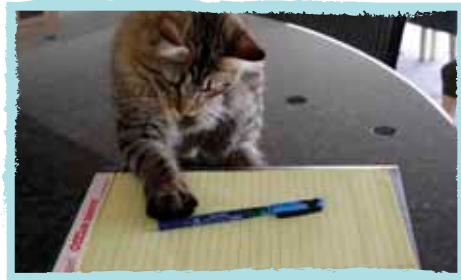
2) Hate is learned. It is easy to hate what we do not know. Hate keeps us from getting acquainted with potential friends. When we come to know someone, human or animal, it's hard to hold on to hate.

3) Be true to who you are. Be proud. Do not let others make you into anything you are not. Know when to listen and how to listen to your inner voice. Be just you!

4) Play the hand you are dealt. No "ifs, ands, or buts!" No "if onlys" and no blame. Play the hand life gives you no matter what challenges come your way.

5) Connect with what you care about. You cannot do everything but you can do something that makes a difference to somebody, and you can connect with others who care about the same things that you do.

The most important thing I've learned is that every person's life deserves a story. It's important to connect with others who have suffered loss, too. When we tell our stories, others get to see how we survive. And we never know what part of our story gives people the courage to go on in their own lives. It doesn't really matter whether the story becomes a published book. What matters is that we learn about the lives of those who share this planet with us.



Henry, JM reporting for duty (JM does not stand for Junior Marine, although I would be proud to be one... it is Just Me!) Paws up!

P.S. I have been thinking of starting my Dear Tabby advice column and decided the very best people I could help are our TAPS families. Little people can write and also big people who are hurting and have questions. Address your questions about grief and loss to me, but send them to editor@taps.org. TAPS will make sure I get them and I can write answers to your questions in future issues. To honor their courage in starting a new journey, I will send a gift of my book to the first fifty people who submit questions for my column. *

Your story is important. The person that you have lost is important. Perhaps you will write their story and it will become part of your story. You can send your stories out in the world the way I did and see what comes back to you. People will not know about your world unless you tell them. You can find out about me and also write to me at www.henrysworld.org. Take a risk, put paw to paper, voice to recorder, and tell your very own story. You never know what will happen when you do!



About the Author



Cathy Conheim is an author, public speaker, radio talk show host, and psychotherapist. Whatever "hat" she wears, she basically is a catalyst for change. Blending compassion with decades of experience, she listens well and responds creatively with usable information for children and adults. Through the innocent voices of animals, she helps humans turn obstacles into opportunities and in the process, develop an emotional vocabulary for improved health. You'll find her at Henrysworld.org.