



# EXPANSIVE

*vs. Limiting Stories*

## MODULE 2

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When we begin to dig into the deep and fertile terrain of our guiding stories, it isn't uncommon to find our inner critics coming out like gangbusters.



***“I can’t say that!”***

***“Nobody would understand.”***

***“People would laugh at me.”***

***“People might hate me.”***

These are the kinds of judgments that can surface right at the threshold of truth-telling, when you courageously begin to claim your personal story. After all, choosing to dive into truth rather than spinning in surface-level stories can feel overwhelming, and sometimes, like an insurmountable task.

Plenty of us would much rather pull the covers over our heads and stay as invisible as we can—if only for the comfort of knowing we’ll be safe from the court of public opinion.

But it wasn’t always like this. After all, you can do a simple Google search of babies and children singing and dancing, and you’ll come up with evidence that our youth carries a certain gift for un-self-conscious, eat-your-heart-out confidence. Before we were old enough to internalize judgment, it’s likely that we were belting out songs and busting out moves like no one was listening or watching. We were too full of joy to modulate our wild creativity in response to someone else’s criticism.

For various reasons, many of which are absolutely valid, every single one of us learns to cover up that beautiful, naked, unadulterated zest for self-expression. We learn to play by the rules and modify our own behavior. Maybe we even become overly sensitive to our environment.

When we don’t express who we are, we lose that sense of self that makes us so unique and brilliant, to begin with. When we are too concerned with being liked or deemed worthy by others, everything we do and say can become a preemptive response to the possibility of judgment. Not to mention, we also begin inflicting the same kind of judgment on ourselves and others.

**But we should always be wary of those judgments, because, in the words of author and memoirist Anaïs Nin,**

*“We don’t see things as they are. We see things as we are.”*

When people are busy judging us (for being too loud, too quiet, too much of this, not enough of that), what they are actually doing is giving us information about who they are, what they like, what they dislike, what they believe about the world, and how they've been conditioned by their family and society.

It also means that if you're the one making assumptions or pointing fingers at someone else, it's a good idea to engage in some self-reflection and consider what your judgments say about you. Judgments of other people can be a handy distraction from a much more important and valuable process: **getting real with ourselves.**

But when we find ourselves slinging judgments at other people (and trust me, all of us do it at one point or another), it's important not to get down on ourselves for being mean or self-righteous. Instead, we can simply choose to be curious and self-aware. We can stop to ask the question: "Am I judging them on the basis of something I fear being judged about, or that I routinely judge myself about?"

When we get honest, we take responsibility for no longer mindlessly perpetuating the cycle of judgment that we fear.

As most of us know, constructive criticism feels quite different from hostile judgments. Our judgments are usually tied to a strong identification with our emotions and the idea that we are "right" and other people are "wrong."

Curiosity can be a wonderfully compassionate tool to apply to both others and ourselves whenever judgments arise. In fact, if we wish to freely explore the stories that make us who we are, we must be willing to put down our pitchforks and try a more compassionate approach.

When we approach something from a place of curiosity, and with no assumptions, we naturally inhabit a place of greater acceptance rather than automatic rejection. This mindset will help us move past our fears of judgment and to begin living more unabashedly into our truth. It is one of our greatest tools for coming back to the nurturing ground of our innate wisdom and joy.

1. What are some of my recurring negative judgments about others? (For example, do I judge certain body types? Am I triggered by what I perceive as rude behavior? Do I dislike people who talk too much?)

2. In general, how do I judge other people who share deep personal stories? If I have negative judgments, how are they a reflection of my own fears and doubts?

3. What are some of my recurring negative judgments about myself?

4. What are some of my judgments about the guiding stories I identified in Module 1?

5. Are there any themes that seem to connect my different judgments about myself and others? If so, what are they?

6. If I were to share my truth with other people, what are my fears about what they would think and how they would react?

# EXPANSIVE VS. LIMITING STORIES

In his illuminating book *The Third Story: Awakening the Love That Transforms*, my friend Barnett Bain looks at three different types of stories in depth.

Simply put, the first story is the actual event that happens, before we interpret it.

The second story is the one we tell that helps us make sense of our experiences. Although we often tell it in retrospect, it typically casts us as the victim or “good guy,” while the rest of the world is the big bad antagonist. This is the kind of story I call the **limiting story**—because although it might sound good to us and the people around us, it seldom encourages us to learn from our experiences and grow beyond them.

The third story Barnett talks about encourages growth. It asks us to reorient ourselves and venture beyond the comfortable container of the story that we’ve become so fond of telling ourselves and others. It asks us to get much bigger and to actively engage our imagination, our faith, our sense of possibility, and new roads that might not have seemed evident to us previously. This is what I call the **expansive story**—because it requires that we move beyond our grievances and regrets about the past. It asks us to become active co-creators in our lives and to come back to a sense of our true power.

Although many of our guiding stories might have been shaped by traumatic early experiences, we don’t need to carry around the emotional residue of that time or let it be what ultimately informs us.

No matter what you have been through, you always have the opportunity to claim and reframe your story—and you don’t need the street cred of divorce, death, abuse, or bankruptcy to do so. After all, there are plenty of wounded people who are proud of the scars they wear, but without awareness, their experiences merely add up to more unprocessed lessons that keep them feeling small, powerless, and cycling in their victimhood.

The limiting story tends to focus on one tiny aspect of our lives and to magnify it so that it dominates our line of vision. In contrast, the expansive story helps us to look at our entire life instead of just the attention-catching fragments, so that we can gain lessons from all of it.

“We all have a story. The difference is: Do you use the story to empower yourself or do you use your story to keep yourself a victim? There isn’t a right or wrong answer. The question itself empowers you to change your life. It’s allowed me to show others that they are empowered in their lives, as well.”

*Sunny Dawn Johnston*

When we tap into our expansive story, we dig into all of our nooks and crannies and bring our wholeness forward. We own our voice, our history, and our life experiences in their totality. We don't deny the ugly, scary parts—but we also don't blow them out of proportion.

Your limiting story is the one that keeps you feeling small, disempowered, and beaten down by life. Your expansive story doesn't dilute the truth of what happened; instead, it challenges you to move forward with gratitude for the lessons learned and a commitment to choosing what you are going to focus on.

Your expansive story embraces the paradox that you simultaneously are and are not your story. You might have gone through unimaginable trauma, but it needn't be what defines you.

So how do we go about changing a limiting story ("I lost my job, my house, and my entire family in one fell swoop—it's the worst thing that could have possibly happened to me") to an expansive story ("Those were the most challenging two years of my life, but they made me stronger and helped me face up to certain truths I'd been ignoring")?

For one thing, giving ourselves plenty of time and self-compassion, as well as the space to grieve our losses and feel our feelings, is crucial. When we feel whatever is happening for us completely, we allow the emotions to move through us rather than take root in our bodies and minds for years to come.

It's also important to ask lots of questions about your experiences rather than taking what happened at face value. In fact, this is how you become intimate with yourself and your story.

When we become tired of telling the same old story, "we can become free from the plot lines of 'how things are' and become inspired to choose new ones for ourselves," Barnet writes.

**On the next page is a list of qualities that characterize limiting and expansive stories.**

As you read the lists, remember that it takes time and internal work to move from a limiting story to an expansive story. It's absolutely okay if you are still living inside a limiting story; in fact, depending on where you are in your process, it might be necessary. Most of us have a combination of limiting and expansive stories that define how we live and what we value. Recognizing our limiting stories is the first step to healing. We are constantly taking baby steps toward a more and more expansive story, and there is always room for growth.

Looking at both lists, can you identify your own limiting and expansive stories?

## Limiting Stories

- + Tend to be stuck in emotions of bitterness, shame, and blame
- + Are obsessed with what happened in the past
- + Place us in a victim role
- + Fixate on feelings of being “broken” or “damaged”
- + Are self-absorbed
- + Create a self-fulfilling prophecy of inviting similar experiences
- + Make us feel physically tight, contracted, and tense
- + Make us feel powerless to change anything in our world
- + Are over-told or not shared at all
- + Have an almost addictive hold over us

## Expansive Stories

- + Are characterized by awareness, understanding, forgiveness, and gratitude for the lessons learned
- + Consider what the impact is on the present moment and look toward what the future could hold
- + Make us willing to take responsibility for our part in the story
- + Connect us to our strength and resilience
- + Create connection and empathy with others
- + Move us toward healing and more effective choices in the present and future
- + Make us feel physically peaceful, invigorated, and spacious
- + Empower us and move us more decisively into lives worth living
- + Are shared to inspire ourselves and others, when appropriate
- + Are stories that we make a conscious, powerful choice to own



# *Feminine Wisdom*

## Connect with Your Heartbrain

While that clump of gray matter that sits between your ears might hog all the credit for your best ideas, recent scientific research has revealed that the seat of conscious awareness may not be the brain alone. A new discipline known as “neurocardiology” reveals the heart as a complex sensory organ with its own functional nervous system, or “heartbrain.” The heartbrain has the capacity to learn, create memories, and even make decisions related to emotions, cognition, and perception.

You can think of your heartbrain as that highly functioning, intuitive, magical part of your consciousness that is connected to your dreams and your innermost self. When we connect with our heartbrain, we trust that our intuition is just as valuable a source of information as our rational brain (and perhaps even more valuable!). In fact, we cannot access the wisdom of the heartbrain without a sense of trust. It might feel like diving off the deep end and into the unknown at first, but the more we practice, the more adept we will become at trusting that we truly do have the answers we are seeking.

Practice staying open by connecting with your heartbrain. Take a few minutes to come back to the feminine breath while resting your hand on your heart and tuning in to the information that is just beneath your fingertips. When you write, check in with your heartbrain. Imagine that all the answers you need live there. If you are stuck in your writing or anything else, practice asking your heartbrain specific questions and waiting for the answer.

The answer will most likely come in the form of an emotion or sensation. Sometimes, however, the response might feel rather elusive, but don’t worry—the heartbrain often generates magnificent answers while you’re sleeping or engaging in another activity altogether (hint: any form of intimacy, whether it’s a hot session with your lover or a spirited chat with your best girlfriend, is highly recommended). The heartbrain is accustomed to delivering “a-ha!” moments when you least expect it.

Simply trust that as long as your heart beats and your blood flows, your heartbrain is steadfastly working in your favor!

# Accessing Your *genius*

So you may be asking, what's the benefit of diving into your expansive stories.

**The answer is simple but profound: Your expansive stories are where your genius lives.**

Your **genius** is that unstoppable force within you that might express itself as an artistic talent, a soothing bedside manner, or the ability to send everyone who meets you into fits of uncontrollable laughter. It might make itself known as a subtle whisper or a bold, outspoken monologue.

Whatever the case, within you is a force of nature all your own that desperately wants to be birthed into the world, to be fully engaged with it.

Your genius is the spice that gives flavor and fullness to your voice. It helps you claim your truth with more chutzpah and courage. It allows you to step into your power when dealing with judgments and self-doubt.

When we choose to dive into our expansive stories, we unlock our genius so that it can fully flourish in our lives. The whisper that we occasionally caught wind of in the background of our minds now becomes a bona-fide whoop of celebration.

Just as curiosity helps dispel the power that judgments have over us, it also enables us to discover our genius. When we begin to ask more questions about ourselves, we naturally start to claim and own our stories as valuable and potentially transformative.

However, if we cannot accept ourselves as we are—if, instead, we treat our truth like it's a pair of shoes we can take back to the department store for an exchange—we never discover our beautiful genius, which wants so badly to come out and play. Instead, we might choose to waste our energy chasing after other people's approval or stewing in old resentments.

**In order to discover your genius, you have to believe that you have one!**



*"When you do things from your soul, you feel  
a river moving in you, a joy."  
Rumi*

One of the major mistakes people make is that we tend to think of a person *being* a genius rather than *having* a genius. Writer Elizabeth Gilbert offers an interesting view of the distinction between these two ways of conceptualizing genius:

“In ancient Greece and ancient Rome...people believed that creativity was this divine attendant spirit that came to human beings from some distant and unknowable source for distant and unknowable reasons. The Romans did not actually think that a genius was a particularly clever individual, they believed that a genius was this sort of magical divine entity who literally lived in the walls of an artist’s studio... and who would come out and invisibly assist the artist with their work.”

Such a view of creativity is enormously freeing, because it means that everyone has their own unique genius. It’s not about being born a prodigy or being “better than” someone else. If we can rest assured in the idea that all of us come equipped with a genius, we can become more confident about locating our own.

Your genius isn’t quite the same as your passion, although the two are certainly connected. While our passions tend to be acquainted with something in the external world (e.g., a passion for horseback riding, sculpture, or community organizing), our genius is all about our singular approach to the world. It stems from a deep internal place and is often the gateway to discovering our passion.

Some people think of their talents as being their genius, but it’s more accurate to view one’s genius as the umbrella that protects and nurtures all our gifts. For instance, you might be an amazing chef and an exquisite giver of back rubs. These are seemingly separate talents, but your genius is the magic pixie dust that gets sprinkled over each of your gifts and makes them identifiably yours.

We all have a clue as to what our genius might be, but the process of truly knowing it takes a lifetime. It isn’t necessary to unpack all aspects of your genius at once. You might never get a head-on look at it, but even if you only catch a glimpse of it from your peripheral vision, it can still offer information galore.

This is why it’s crucial to come back to the power of our personal stories. Because our stories offer us a convenient chronicle of our actions, reactions, habits, and behaviors, examining them can help us make better sense of the world and our place in it. Our stories are truly the building blocks of our genius. The more awareness we gain of our stories, the more acquainted we will become with the dynamic, ever-evolving spirit of our genius.



1. Which of my accomplishments am I proudest of? What do these experiences have in common?

2. What are some unique qualities about myself? (For example, maybe I'm an uproariously funny person who never fails to get a laugh out of my chosen audience. Or perhaps I have an unusual life experience that gives me a certain level of understanding or expertise.)

3. What kind of positive feedback have I consistently received from people in my life? (For example, perhaps I am constantly praised for being outgoing and good at striking up a conversation with just about anyone.)

4. If I knew for sure what my special genius was, what would it be?



## Opening to our judgments

about ourselves and others and allowing ourselves to recognize where we've been stuck in limited storytelling are integral to growing our truth-teller muscles. This is a brave undertaking! Keep going.

You've done a great job of diving in.

**Respond to the following prompt (and if you choose, post your response in the Facebook group):**

When it comes to your own personal genius, what do you think it is and how can this guide the way you claim your truth?



# HOMEPLAY 1

**Read at least three pieces from the list of Women For One truthteller stories below:**

***“Emotional Abuse: The Invisible Train Wreck,” by Mary Elizabeth Robinson***

<http://womenforone.com/emotional-abuse-the-invisible-train-wreck/>

***“The Story of My Life,” by Samantha Peterson***

<http://womenforone.com/the-story-of-my-life-by-samantha-peterson/>

***“Not a ‘Smile and Wave’ Kind of Mom,” by Victoria Markham***

<http://womenforone.com/not-a-smile-and-wave-kind-of-mom/>

***“Deceit,” by A.B.***

<http://womenforone.com/deceit/>

***“An Open Letter to My Rapist,” by Mariann Martland***

<http://womenforone.com/an-open-letter-to-my-rapist/>

***“I’m Gay and That’s Okay with God,” by Regina Cates***

<http://womenforone.com/im-gay-and-thats-okay-with-god-by-regina-cates/>

***“Let’s Start Talking,” by Anonymous***

<http://womenforone.com/lets-start-talking/>

***“To Save Your Daughter,” by Anonymous***

<http://womenforone.com/to-save-your-daughter/>

***“Out Here on My Own,” by Nikki Payne***

<http://womenforone.com/out-here-on-my-own-by-nikki-payne/>

***“From One Stepmom to Another,” by Jill Johns***

<http://womenforone.com/one-stepmom-another/>

***“A Letter to My Skin,” by Anna Feldman***

<http://womenforone.com/a-letter-to-my-skin/>

Notice any of your judgments, both negative and positive. Remember that it’s okay to have judgments—don’t judge yourself for judging! Just choose to be aware of what your judgments reveal about you—your beliefs, your values, your conditioning, and maybe even unprocessed emotions.

In reading the stories, notice the thoughts and feelings that are evoked. Which stories are you drawn to, and why? Which ones repel you, and why? Refer back to the table in this module that offers distinctions between limiting and expansive stories. Which pieces that you read were limiting stories? Expansive stories? A combination of both?



# HOMEPLAY 2

**Intentionally connect with the spirit of your genius. Ask yourself the following questions, and journal your answers.**

- a) What is my greatest strength?**
- b) When have I been at my best and most joyful?**
- c) When have I truly seen myself shine?**
- d) Which of my qualities should I celebrate more often?**
- e) In what ways do I engage in self-sabotage around my strengths?**

Now, create a “character” based on your answers. Give her a name, and create a brief backstory about who she is. If you want to make her a fantastical superhero, go for it! Or perhaps she is an unassuming librarian—reserved on the outside but full of zest and undiscovered stories on the inside. Whatever the case, personify your genius in a couple paragraphs.

After you’ve created the character sketch of your genius, refer back to it through the course, or whenever you’re feeling disempowered or confused.

If you find yourself experiencing uncertainty or challenges this week, ask yourself: What would [“name of my genius”] do?



# HOMEPLAY 3

**In this assignment, you will turn a limiting story into an expansive story.** Refer to the table in this module that describes limiting stories, and then identify one you'd like to work with. While moving into an expansive story takes time, it may not always be possible to immediately heal our old wounds. Let's start by gaining some awareness.

1. Take ten minutes to write out your limiting story (or if you wish, record yourself speaking it aloud and then transcribe it). Include the most crucial incidents. Include your judgments, frustrations, worries, and anything else you want, without censoring yourself.
2. Now, take that story and write about it from the perspective of someone who is exercising full awareness of what happened (for extra help, connect with the spirit of your genius and get curious about how she'd rewrite your story). Again, include the most crucial and memorable incidents, but this time, acknowledge the valuable lessons from those moments. How were you touched and transformed?

In reading over both versions of your story, notice how each one makes you feel. Which story would you like to share with the people in your life? (For extra credit, read your chosen story aloud to someone you trust.)



# HOMEPLAY 4

**Look over the Homeplay from Module 1 where you identified ten specific guiding stories.**

We will be working to refine our guiding stories in the next modules, and in Module 4, we will expand one of our guiding stories into a longer written piece. Check in with your heartbrain and select the story you wish to work on. Remember that you can always change your mind if you identify a different story later. But for now, in reviewing your guiding stories, what is the truth that your soul longs to articulate? Journal for a few minutes on your response to that question.