

Chapter One

What's Your Story?

“When my parents fought, it was only about money. Now, I have ‘money is the root of all evil’ in my head. I’m not worried about it until I have to be, until I have a problem I have to deal with, and then I get very stressed out.”

—Sandy, 30s, marketing professional

“I’ve had a lousy money story my whole life, based on the way my parents treated money. They argued about it, and my money story became that money is painful, ignore it, and if you say anything about it, it will get ignored anyway.”

—Megan, 50s, coach

“If you have money you are allowed to do many things, but if you don’t you are stuck. Money becomes everything. When I don’t have money, I feel like I’m doing something wrong. It’s stressful every day of my life.”

—Ruby, 50s, teacher

“I never seem to get money into my investment account. Every month I think I’ll put money in, but I just don’t do it. I think I’m worried about an emergency.”

—Bobbie, 50s, pharmaceutical sales

THE PROMISE

Consciously or not, we all have stories we tell ourselves about money. In this chapter, you’ll uncover your own money story and mindset—your first step in developing a more empowered approach to your finances and achieving greater financial well-being.

Please meet a former client of mine who uncovered her own story.

Anne’s Story, Part One

Anne grew up with a home life that was unstable, and money was often tight. After her parents’ marriage ended, her mother was forced to go to work to support the family. Anne learned to be creative and resourceful because she needed to. That was the state of play that seemed familiar. So, she worked full time while she put herself through college, launched her career, and got married.

On the surface, Anne seemed to have achieved success, even managing to live in a high-cost town with good schools. But to do all that, she was living with little in the way of a financial cushion. Intellectually, she recognized that her situation was precarious, but she self-identified as an intrepid survivor, and she knew her ingenuity had worked for her in the past. She pushed any plans to boost

financial stability to the back burner—until a sudden financial emergency upended her life. The family had to downsize, and even with that change, financial security seemed elusive.

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Stories are powerful things, and we humans have used them through the centuries to explain natural phenomena and teach lessons. The ancient Greeks used the story of Persephone to explain the changing seasons. Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare demonstrates that slow and steady can win the race.

Not all stories come from the world right around us, though. Some stories we tell ourselves reflect experiences much earlier in our lives, or values and beliefs we developed early on. And sometimes, we outgrow those stories. Sometimes they just don't match our current reality anymore.

For many women, that is especially true when it comes to money.

HOW WE CREATE MONEY STORIES

We form a lot of our ideas about money at an early age. Money plays a big role in family life—not because every family is laser focused on making money, but because it can make so many things possible (or not) for families.

Unlike food or a home, though, money is an abstract concept, and as young children we struggle to understand abstract ideas. As a result, we look to our parents' behavior with money for clues about what to think about financial matters and how we should behave with our own money.

Emily's parents grew up during the Depression and taught her that "we could fall into poverty tomorrow." Now, as an adult, she finds it impossible to relax about her finances. "I'm unable to know how I would live without financial anxiety. To me that means being irresponsible or wasteful."

Emily's experience is not uncommon. As I interviewed women for my research, I asked them where their money beliefs came from. Some 103 of the 109 women I spoke to pointed to their childhoods.

When we live with a story long enough—for our purposes, a story about money—it becomes hardwired in our mind. We don't even consciously summon it up. It just becomes our instinctive, default lens for interpreting and responding to events.

WHEN MONEY STORIES NO LONGER FIT

There is nothing inherently problematic about learning to view the world through a parent's eyes.

Adopting parental money beliefs as children can cause problems, though. (As you saw in the introduction, I have personal experience with this.)

For one thing, young children find it hard to think with nuance. If you have ever heard a young child proclaim that they hate a certain food or they never get to play at a certain park, you know they are thinking in absolutes. Children's money stories can have the same kind of absolutism. But if we are still telling ourselves those stories as adults, they can cause us stress and anxiety. If we believe we will never be able to retire, that is frightening. If we believe we will inevitably spend more than we intend and go over budget, that can lead to self-blame or even keep us from trying to stick to a financial plan.

In addition, parents are only human, and our parents can have less than healthy money beliefs and behaviors. Our parents

may have taken the feast-or-famine approach to money, splurging when times were good and having to scrimp when their luck ran out. They may have argued about money. They may have kept us on a tight leash when it came to spending so that we felt bad about the clothes we wore to school. Any of these could have influenced how we feel about money as adults—and how we behave.

The overarching issue is that a child's-eye view of money is almost bound to be one that is not empowered. And if we hang onto that view into adulthood, we may be thinking about money—and about ourselves in relation to our money—in a way that does not reflect all the skills and talents we have developed as adults.

“My perception of money is: if I have it, I’m riding super high and if I don’t, I’m the lowest of the low. It’s tied with my self-image.”

—Andrea, 40s, administrative assistant

“I feel vaguely anxious. I just hope I’m doing the right thing. I don’t follow what my investment accounts are doing. I feel like that’s an arbitrary pile of money that I can’t control. I pay close attention to my checking account. I don’t feel completely comfortable.”

—Agnes, 50s, consultant

The truth is, we outgrow beliefs all the time. If you have ever gone to a high school or college reunion where former classmates remind you of things you did or said that seem totally out of character for you now, you have moved beyond a story. Someone might recall that you used to be the class comedian and you may think, “That’s not me!” And it no longer is. Yes, you may

have behaved that way in the past—and your former classmates haven't seen you in years, so they haven't seen you change—but that doesn't match who you are today.

If long-ago classmates are out of touch with who we are now, it doesn't really matter. The biggest impact you'll experience will likely be a few embarrassing social media posts. But when we carry around money stories about ourselves that are no longer accurate, or even helpful, that is a problem.

THE REAL DOWNSIDE OF OLD STORIES

Negative, out-of-date money stories can hurt us emotionally as adults. They can affect how we feel about ourselves, which can then affect how we view and act upon the world.

- If our story is that we will never be able to get a handle on our finances, or master a new approach to a financial task, it can reduce our self-confidence.
- A money story that tells us we are just not as good as others at dealing with money makes us feel incompetent and can lower our self-esteem.
- Perhaps we carry a money story that our needs don't deserve the same attention as the needs of others. We are inherently telling ourselves we are not worthy, and that can damage our sense of self-worth.

We can feel bad about how we deal with money even when, by any objective standard, we are capable and successful in our careers, our communities, and our relationships.

Sophia, a former client of mine, came to me because she became highly anxious whenever she needed to work on a budget or tackle other financial tasks. Her tangled-up feelings and anxieties about money even showed up in her body

language. She would sit with her legs crossed and arms hugging her sides when she talked about her money. You could feel the stress she was carrying. And this woman, incredibly skilled, intelligent, creative, and courageous, asked me one day after revealing a money fear, “What is wrong with me?”

Nothing was wrong with Sophia. She was professionally accomplished, had a fulfilling family life, and was connected to her community. But she had internalized her money anxieties.

In fact, some of us feel bad about our money lives even when we feel happy and proud about almost everything else we do.

“When I feel financial stress, typically it shows up initially in feelings of ‘I’m so stupid, I can’t manage my money.’ I feel totally incompetent. Stupid. I should be able to do this better.”

—Evie, 52, business owner

The issue extends beyond unpleasant feelings. When we do not feel emotionally solid dealing with money, it gets harder for us to bring our A game to deal with the financial challenges so many of us face. In short, external circumstances affect our internal story, which then affects our external actions.

- We negotiate less often to be paid what we are worth.
- We put our needs behind everyone else’s.
- Many of us still cede long-term financial decision-making to others.

A story may just be a story, but an out-of-date money story can affect our well-being.

If the idea of money stories is resonating with you, please know that having a longstanding set of beliefs about money is

not a sign of some personal weakness or failing. Whatever happened in the past is over, but it is human nature for experiences to influence our beliefs, especially about abstract things like money.

I am not here to judge you. In fact, I hope you consider this book a judgment-free zone. We are all trying to do the best we can in life, and there is a lot we can't control. Your goal now is to develop the emotional armor and skills you need to use your money in service of your ideal life. That is why we need a money story that reflects who we are today. It should embody not just our past experiences, but also the strengths and talents we deploy in so many other parts of our lives. It needs to give us a complete picture of our past, our present, *and* our potential future.

WHAT WE CAN DO

The first step in creating a money story that reflects our potential is uncovering the money story we are carrying around today.

That may feel a little unsettling. You may never have asked yourself the questions that follow. But if you take your time, dig deep, really notice the story you tell yourself about money, and write it down, it truly will make a difference.

This is a writing exercise, so get some paper or open a document file on your computer.

WHY A WRITING EXERCISE IS YOUR FIRST ACTION ITEM

You may be wondering why the first exercise in this book is not a financial one, like examining your spending habits or making a budget.

You can find plenty of books that make those things your first to-do items. But before you head back to the bookstore, consider

this: *if all it took to transform your relationship to money were a spending tracker and a budget, you would have done it already.* You know there are any number of tools for budgeting and tracking spending in libraries and online. You can watch innumerable videos and read hundreds of books about investing.

Even so, here you are—because those resources alone are not enough for you. Until you trust that you are capable of change, and you are truly motivated to make change happen, all the books, videos, and instruction manuals in the world will do little to help you.

Yes, you will find all kinds of clear, actionable suggestions and advice about tracking your spending, creating a budget, and more in the Learn and Build sections of this book. But first, you will find tools and practices to help you see and believe that you truly can do this for yourself. You will see how to build your confidence with money and uncover your true motivation to change. That is where this writing exercise comes in. “Hearing” what you tell yourself about money is your first step to becoming a more confident, capable manager of your finances.

You may decide to tackle the four questions that follow all at once, or you may spend a few minutes on one and return later, again and again. This may be a quick exercise for you if your money feelings are very close to the surface. But there is no one right way for everyone. If you take a while to dig deep with these questions, that will also help you.

Grab a paper and pen and find yourself a quiet place to sit. Take a few deep breaths and relax. Then, ask yourself:

Question One: How do I feel about money?

Truly, there is no one right answer. The point of the first question is for you to notice your go-to, instinctive associations with money.

- Is money something you are comfortable using for your own benefit?

- Does it scare you?
- Do you give it power over you?
- How do you feel when you spend money versus invest your savings?

Remember: How you feel is just . . . how you feel. This has nothing to do with your merits as a person. Honestly *articulating* how you feel about money can simply help you understand the roots of your financial anxiety and discomfort, which in turn will help you start forming a better relationship with money.

Question Two: What does money represent for me?

Again, it is impossible to come up with a wrong answer to this question—but I realize it can still be unsettling. It's quite possible that you have never consciously asked this of yourself. That is fine.

Considering your past experiences with money may highlight what money represents for you today, and how you relate to it. You can give it a try.

However you decide to approach this question, your goal is to really identify without judgment the role that money plays in your life. Remember—no two women are exactly alike.

“At this point money represents freedom to me. And because I’m not making enough to cover what I have to pay, it stresses me out a lot. I got myself more in a hole while I was going to school. Now, I have to cancel plans because it’s that or put gas in the car.”

—Jerri, 30s, nurse

Question Three: Where do my feelings about money come from?

Many of the women I interviewed for my own research pointed to their upbringing when I asked them this question, but not everyone did. Your response may be entirely different from all of theirs.

Do your best to really flesh out what specifically happened in your past to inform how you feel about money today.

- Where were you when it happened, and how did you feel at the time?
- How much financial education did you receive at home so you could put this experience in context?

The more detailed your answer to this question about money and your personal history, the more it will help you really understand what it is that drove you to pick up this book and take a step toward changing your relationship to money.

“I had such a good childhood—but they argued about money. I remember one Christmas my mom crying because my dad had bought her something and she was upset that he spent the money. There was fear. And I feel like I carry that now.”

—Cassie, 40s, attorney

Question Four: What have I learned to believe about money given the experiences I have had?

Answering this question will show you your money story.

Do your best to just notice what that story is and stay neutral and free of judgment. Your money story is just that: your story. It may not be serving you today—and we’re going to address that.

By itself, though, your story is not inherently good or bad. Remember: when you become consciously aware of what you tell yourself as you think about money matters, you get clues as to why you may feel bad about money.

You are on a mission to uncover what is driving your emotions around money so that, ultimately, you can feel better—more capable, confident, and clear. When you discern your money story, write it down.

Congratulations! You've completed the first thought exercise in this book. And you have uncovered a key part of your relationship to money.

Over time, you may well discover that you have more than one money story you tell yourself. You may have a story about money surprises, another about taking charge of your money, and still another about your money future. I suspect, though, that all your money stories will reveal similar things about your identity—about the person you think you are when you are engaging with your finances.

REFLECTIONS

To be clear, I am not suggesting that an updated money story is the solution to all our financial challenges. Millions of women face enormous financial hurdles and contend with financial emergencies that are in no way their fault. The most uplifting money story in the world cannot negate the effects of a job loss or the structural inequities we face.

Still, when we uncover our money story and really start to understand why we relate to money the way we do, it is an essential first step toward financial wellness. Money is so much more than bits of metal and pieces of paper. It carries all kinds of emotional baggage. When that emotional baggage keeps us from living up to our potential, that is a cost that cannot be recouped.

On the flip side, an up-to-date, empowering money story can help us respond confidently and capably when we inevitably encounter financial challenges, large or small. We are better able to bring our knowledge and talents to the task of overcoming what is in front of us.

That is what happened for Anne.

Anne's Story, Part Two

When Anne first came to me, she knew that ingenuity was part of her identity, but she had not noticed how her identity as someone who could get out of scrapes was keeping her in situations where she had to draw on that ability. That in turn was impeding her ability to reach for big goals or draw on her other strengths, like resilience and self-trust. Over time, she realized that she was spending more time and energy on making ends meet than on planning for a future in line with her values and goals.

As Anne learned to tap all her strengths, she saw that if she had a plan for the day-to-day that improved her baseline stability, her creativity and drive could propel her into the future she wanted. She began setting clear goals for herself and her family. Then she started tracking her spending and checking in to make sure it was in line with those goals. Spending time on her finances, she said, was “almost fun.” Soon, she started asking to be paid more for freelance work. And later that year, when a new job offer surfaced, she had the self-confidence to stretch and take the role, complete with a higher salary and greater alignment with her long-term career and financial objectives.

WHERE WE GO NEXT

You may not land your dream job after reading this chapter. But you can start creating new, more empowered associations with money. You can rewrite your money story so that it doesn't cause you pain but instead reflects the complete you—including your strengths and potential. You can even rewrite your story to make it one that has you in charge of your finances, a story that sets you on your way toward a healthier relationship with money and greater financial well-being. I will show you how in the next chapter.

You have climbed the first step on the staircase. Well done! Let's keep going, onward and upward.