

Changing the Narrative
By
Daniel E. White November 24, 2025

“We are what we are because we have been what we have been.” You might have heard this line before when someone is trying to explain circumstances. You, like me, might see where there are ways in which the assertion is accurate: much of who we are is shaped by our genetics, our past experiences, our opinions shaped by having lived our lives to this point.

The stories below, though, challenge the assertion that “we are what we are because we have been what we have been” is a complete answer. Narratives can be shaped and changed.

On a recent Delta Air flight to Salt Lake City, the plane was sure to be late, much later than scheduled. Some minutes before the upcoming late landing, a flight attendant called the attention of the passengers over the public address system.

“How many of you are concluding your flying today when we land in Salt Lake City? Please raise your hands.” A hand from most passengers went up.

“How many of you have ever been on a flight that was landing later than scheduled, endangering your ability to make a connecting flight?” Most hands remained raised. “Put your hands down now, and thanks. Now, remember how you felt when you were worried that you would not make the connection.”

The flight attendant continued, “How many of you have a connecting flight out of Salt Lake City?” The rest of the passengers raised a hand. “Now, you passengers who raised your hands a moment ago, would you look around the cabin and take note of the people with their hands raised now.” Nearly everyone took a look.

“Can you work together with me to ensure that the people holding their hands up now get off the plane first? That will give them a better chance to make their connections.”

Author Justin Bariso reported that Katherin Peters, co-founder of the consulting firm, Withiii Leadership, was on the plane and noticed what came next. “The entire energy on the plane had shifted to create a group effort to ensure that the connecting passengers got off first.”

Effective and empathic leadership can change the narrative. Which of us would not respond to leadership that encouraged us to work together to serve the needs of others?

A friend gave me the second story, “Changing Stripes and Making a Difference.” The punch line: Chicago’s O’Hare Airport is named for this person.

Al Capone’s place in U.S. history is well-known. In the 1920’s, Capone and his Mafia colleagues dominated Chicago’s crime scene, Elliott Ness and the feds notwithstanding. From time to time, agents of the law managed to bring charges against Capone, but time and again, he managed to “beat the rap,” largely because he retained, for a very large sum of money, “Easy Eddie” as his attorney. Easy Eddie lived large, with little concern for the nature of his famous client’s business.

Easy Eddie, though, had an Achilles Heel. He had a young son he loved dearly. At some point, Eddie decided that he was not being a role model for how he wanted his son to grow up. So, Eddie went to the feds. His storytelling began the downfall of Capone. Eddie was, in fact, a hero in the fight against organized crime.

He knew the risks. They came home to roost in a barrage of gunfire on a Chicago street.

Fast forward to World War Two, the Pacific Theater, the carrier Lexington, 1942. The Lieutenant Commander led his squadron on a patrol near enemy lines. Not long into the mission, he noted that he was losing fuel for some reason and would need to return to the ship.

On the way, he saw a squadron of Japanese fighters headed toward the U.S. fleet. Without hesitation, he dove into the midst of that squadron, guns ablaze, scraping his wings against enemy planes, doing whatever he could to divert the fighters. It worked. The would-be attackers retreated. When he got back to the Lexington, he reported his actions, and an on-board camera reported the effectiveness of his exploit.

A year later, he lost his life in aerial combat in the Pacific. But Chicago did not forget his heroic actions.

When police searched Easy Eddie’s body, they found a poem by Robert H. Smith that Eddie must have shared with his son who became Lieutenant Commander O’Hare. It read:

"The clock of life is wound but once, and no man has the power to tell just when the hands will stop, at late or early hour. Now is the only time you own. Live, love, toil with a will. Place no faith in time. For the clock may soon be still."

Though it cost him his life, Easy Eddie changed the narrative. Narratives can be changed by inspiring role models.

In her *The Sunday Paper*, November 23, 2025, Maria Shriver wrote: “The world may be harsh, but we don’t have to be. We can exemplify what the world needs more of: grace, light, compassion, and kindness.”

You and I can be the role models.

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