SEVEN STAGES

STORY AND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"To dwell in the here and now does not mean you never think about the past or responsibly plan for the future. The idea is simply not to allow yourself to get lost in regrets about the past or worries about the future. If you are firmly grounded in the present moment, the past can be an object of inquiry, the object of your mindfulness and concentration. You can attain many insights by looking into the past. But you are still grounded in the present moment."

Thích Nhất Hanh, The Art of Power

This book is first a tribute to Thích Nhất Hanh. While I do not anywhere refer to his teachings directly, as my journey began many years ago, his voice, through a number of recordings I used in my meditation practice, gave me the strength to sit still. His mind and heart emanate peacefulness, and I used that peacefulness to examine the most difficult and scary parts of myself.

For the space I find for all my writing work now, I am indebted to my staff at the Center for Digital Storytelling: **Emily Paulos**, **Amy Hill**, **Daniel Weinshenker**, **Andrea Spagat**, **Stefani Sese**, **Rob Kershaw**, **Allison Myers**, and most especially **Zoe Jacobson**. This group of dedicated professionals in storytelling have become world changers; their commitment and creativity seem boundless. Their love, expressed in the ways they hold space for others, is an anchor for my work in story.

I extend these thanks to the many contractors working with our center, including **Arlene Goldbard**, **Mary Ann McNair**, **Tommy Orange**, **Lisa Nelson-Haynes**, **Eugenia Gardner**, **Clinton Gilbert, Marie Lovejoy**, and many others.

I want to call out my kids, **Amalina** and **Massimo**, through them I learn more about myself than any other relationship. And I call out their mother **Nina Mullen** for caring and supporting their lives.

I thank all of the participants in the Spring 2013 Webinar, the September 2013 retreat in Vilanova i La Geltru, Catalonia, and the Fall 2013 Webinar for their contributions.

I give special thanks to **Neus Marin** for finding me a place to work for a month in Catalonia to finish this book, and to all my new friends in this wonderful region, destined to be the newest country in Europe. Forsa Catalunya!

Finally, I want to thank all of the storytellers who have shared their stories, and the designer, **Rose Hristova**.

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FOREWORD

My repeated recommendation of the Seven Stages process to colleagues, friends and students has sometimes been met with an initial “and what’s so great about it?” response. My answer is “everyone should have at least one learning experience that shakes them up and then puts them together again”. In short, critical re-assemblage through learning can be profound and is perhaps a necessary rite of passage. How else can we move forward? How else can we make our way in today’s complex world? Each of us is tasked with the challenge of aligning purpose and passion while negotiating personal autonomy and simultaneously strengthening community ties. The promotional introduction to the webinar *Seven Stages: Story and the Human Experience* explains that the series of interactive and participative sessions aims to “unearth the stories embedded in our daily lives and to use them to learn about ourselves, our relationships, and our place in the community”.

The Seven Stages approach is a lens for recognizing and working with different ways of knowing and being in the world. The core lesson is that in our distinctly human desire to wrestle with the complexity of daily life we can navigate multiple meaning-making pathways into and across the breadth of lived experience. The Seven Stages is a metaphorical magic carpet woven from the strands of various interpretative and multi-disciplinary frameworks. These include psychology, philosophy, literature, and education. As workbook users/readers our destination is the achievement of insightful “ah-ha” moments. Through these we recognize our possibilities, how things can be and what we must do. We are brought closer to the moral, intellectual and emotional clarity necessary for right and good action in the world.

The Seven Stages: Story and the Human Experience workbook is not a simple “how to” guide. It is a manifesto for transformation through the creative power of biographical story making and storytelling. The workbook includes explanations of how the Seven Stages framework emerged. We learn that the design is the product of an interactive juxtaposition of theory and practice, exposition and storytelling, showing and doing. These revelations include the Seven Stages “back-story”; Joe’s sources of inspiration, his doubts, concerns and areas of skepticism. Throughout, Joe the teacher/facilitator is present as the “guide on the side”, never “the sage on the stage”. The message is clear, ordinary people can and do negotiate their own learning. A democratic learning environment respects

and honors the presence and humanity of all learners. There are no hidden agendas.

The Seven Stages workbook begins with one of many of Joe's own stories. The user/reader is offered these illustrative and personal stories and asides throughout. These are not heroic stories, they are personal narratives of journey, inspiration and vulnerability; they resonate and effectively draw the reader into the story circle alongside Joe, the teller. Around the story circle we are all listeners, we are all tellers, there is no place for the omniscient, invisible, detached author/facilitator. The presence of Joe's stories increases the workbook's authenticity.

As a community educator I am sometimes asked: "And what do you really you do?" On most occasions, my response is to stumble through a complicated explanation about the value of making sense of human experience and the role of educational practices that foster insightful learning. In essence much of what we define as the world of community education is the space in which adults are offered the opportunity to learn about self, other and their personal and collective capacity for agency in and on the world. The Seven Stages workbook is one of these important and effective transformative learning spaces.

Janet Ferguson, Director, Senior Learning Center, Educator, Bermuda

Ms. Janet Ferguson (Ph.D) is a community educator and biographical researcher. For over twenty-five years she has worked to promote personal and collective change through insightful learning.

INTRODUCTION

"Understanding the Way of Story as a sacred pattern and a living event. Story can reveal a spiritual path and or the way to healing. Stories become the foundation of health, peace-building and vision...Our individual stories, when carefully attended, can reveal each person's particular path of healing and transformation...Learning to recognize the Story that we or another is living can be a worthy life work."

Deena Metzger

I am a storyworker. For three decades I have done different kinds of storywork, defined here as the various ways one engages in group and individual crafting, designing, producing and distributing stories. I am best known as the founder of a Digital Storytelling process, which has the sharing in the form of a particular kind of short film. You can find many examples of this work through the Center for Digital Storytelling website, www.storycenter.org.

But along with most of my staff and larger set of colleagues that have grown from this movement, despite the fact we spend much time learning the tools of contemporary communication, we do not see ourselves principally as multimedia professionals. When you listen and help shape hundreds of stories a year, working intimately at times with people and their lives, you stop thinking about stories as stories, as documents. You start to see the process of helping someone to find the story they have to tell as a duty, something you are called to do.

And you begin to see patterns. Stories told for similar reasons, similar progressions. And people going through similar awakenings, gaining new awareness through the process.

I come to this book carrying thousands of people's stories in my head, so many that they all blend together, and the pattern is a seething wash of color, darkness, light, and perfect snapshots of clarity. This book is the echo of all that work.

But of all the stories swirling in my head, it was my own story, and deep journey, that initiated my desire to write this book. Seven Stages is a reflection of the trip I took with a decision to shift my life some four years ago in November of 2009.

The story began with a explosive moment of anger at work. Here is that story.

I woke up on a Monday morning with a worse than normal sense of fatigue. I was home the day before from ten days in China. China is nine hours west, or fifteen hours east, of Berkeley. That means 7 a.m. on the West Coast is 10 p.m. in Shanghai.

I go to Europe often, and I hate the first day in that direction. I was not used to waking up in my own bed feeling this feeling. My body, my spirit, was not happy.

I dragged myself into the office with already with a high degree of uncertainty. For some crazy reason I had scheduled a three-day film shoot to immediately begin on my return. I was working with a crew that I knew and trusted, but also with a group of former foster youth, connected to a client, that I did not. I was trying some fancy new production approach for the shoot, an Apple Computer-advertisement-style white background. Let's just say production design is not really my forté. I was stretching. I was stressed.

I arrived about forty minutes ahead of schedule, and wandered into the little closet at our old Center for Digital Storytelling office that was my space. While I was gone, the place had been cleaned up. I noticed someone had taken down the few family photos of my kids. They hung above the desk I use and share, and it was a small marker of my life – a bit of an alter. And it wasn't there.

Some switch inside me tripped.

I wanted to scream at someone, I wanted to scream using every profanity I knew, and simply say, "FIX IT!" Put it back the way it was. I called my long time co-director/manager and caught her on the phone. I went off for no more than thirty seconds before she hung up. I called my administrator and left a ranting, furious message.

I don't remember, ever, being that angry at someone at work.

With my brain still in an agonized state of fury, the door bell rang, and the crew and the client arrived.

But some part of me knew that shadow of anger was familiar to those around me, people I loved and trusted – not just my co-workers, but my family. By that Friday, my co-workers met with me. An intervention. The gist: "You can't do that. Not if you want folks working with you."

Some small part of me still wants to resist. But...But... But. But at that moment, I simply decided to change.

Why is this particular story important? The change that I went through (not drinking for eighteen months, yoga, meditation, ongoing therapy and energy work,

training in massage therapy, other shifts in work and my personal life), came out of a deep desire to change. To shift from one perspective of self-knowing, one that might have been a dominant narrative for thirty years, to another way of knowing. I turned a corner. I wrote a new story.

As you will see, a large amount of new thinking has emerged from that work. And the goal of my efforts is to give you as an individual reader, or as a group participant of a workshop, a jump start to shift your perspective about yourself.

The Seven Story

I was born in a seven year, 1957. In the U.S., this was the year of peak population growth, more children born this year in the U.S. than any year since. There are lots of us '57 kids, tail end of the baby boom. Seven in '64, fourteen in '71, twenty-one in '78, twenty-eight in '85, thirty-five in '92, forty-two in '99, and forty-nine in '06. And now, fifty-six in 2013. I can see seven distinct stories of me in each era: lost child, high-energy teen, young revolutionary, theater producer, creative entrepreneur, emerging storytelling authority in the dot.com moment, and established old dude of the Center for Digital Storytelling. I can see the world changing around me as well, the shifts in trends in each era shaping me in specific ways.

As I approach the next turn of seven I am aware of the end run. Whether I reach sixty-three, seventy, seventy-seven, eighty-four, or beyond, I treat the possibility of life interruption a bit more seriously, and this seems to drive a desire to clarify my experience in a system of understanding that fits my broad interests.

1957 was the same year the participants of Michael Apted's *7-Up series* of documentaries were born. So far there have been seven documentaries following the intimate lives of a group of people from the U.K., the legitimate forbearer of impulse called Reality TV (although I am sure Apted wants no credit for the monster Reality TV has become). Still, Apted's orientation to document life in seven-year installments, as a grand existential exercise in life process awareness, is an interesting parallel to the goals of this writing and research project.

The baby boom generation in the U.S. has been the most "self" concerned in human history. We were born into the existential dilemma inside post-war consumer capitalist affluence. We were "free" in a way that perhaps no other vast society of humans had ever been free, and we shared both the despair of our freedom, and the need and opportunity, as Kierkegaard would have appreciated, to invent for ourselves an authentic and meaningful life.

The Texas hippie part of me wanted to cut away the bullshit – to live truthfully in the face of the obscuring and demeaning dominant culture. Growing up in Dallas, as the son of left leaning intellectual-activists, plopped down in the middle of a modernist-Christian ideology. The Texans of my youth were great people, but they were more than a little in denial about many things. They spoke compassion while supporting unbridled greed; they offered fellowship and decency while countenancing the cruelest kinds of racist behavior; they trumpeted the institution of marriage while covering up widespread violence against women in the home; they preached pre-marital abstinence while leading the country in children by unwed mothers. They were, taken in aggregate, people that simply lied to themselves a lot.

I liked the idea of being a truth teller in the face of that denial. It drew me to journalism, to law, to political action, to theater, to storywork in new media. I wanted badly to be authentic, a problematic word, but in my cultural context it was the antidote to superficiality, to vacuity, the anti-matter to the Aryan Cheerleader world of North Texas that gave us George Bush, Jr. and Dr. Phil, Barney and Mary Kay Cosmetics.

Of course, wanting to be truthful, wanting to drop into a radical root of understanding, does not mean you succeed. I was lost in my own radical ideologies, lost in my own denial about unresolved personal issues, lost in my own fears of the judgment of others, in my own sense of safety. We cannot escape the obscuring impulse, the confirmation bias; we can only hope we keep an appropriate distance from self-delusion. So we forgive. I forgive my Texas kin, just as I forgive myself, for our failures to achieve our separate ideas of moral perfection.

The work of the Seven Stages book is to help each of us find ways to reveal truths about our lives. Revealing pieces of the puzzle of self has become concomitant with recovery to me. I am not sure I will ever see the finished puzzle as a whole, but at least some parts will make more sense.

Owning Our Own Stories of Recovery

I like the joke that if you want to make a million dollars, write a book about how to make a million dollars. So it is with self-help books and celebrities. As likely as not, this book will fall into the Self-Help genre at the online bookstore. This disturbs me. I question the role of the self-help industry in our cultures. So many books, offering so many solutions. The existential need they are addressing is profound, but taken as a whole, they are a fast food or supermarket approach to spiritual and psychological nourishment. Quick fixes and convenience, as we have found with our dietary habits, do not solve

deeply integrated and complex problems. This book promises little in terms of enlightenment or clear steps to recovery.

For decades, I have had a lay interest in psychology, in cognition, in memory and life process, but writing about these issues has always been safely confined to my known area of expertise: storywork. I do find our work in story to be a legitimate part of the grand do-it-yourself reclamation project that is confronting consumer capitalism. We are re-negotiating the terms of our relationship to the authority of corporations, educational, government and other authoritative institutions that have prescribed our processes of health and well-being. We are becoming increasingly well-informed citizens, choosing very specific paths as individuals, and as communities, to make ourselves whole. That project, while it might have started with various reactions to consumer capitalist culture – in food, health, home life and material culture – has also been applied increasingly to recovery and spiritual practices. We are co-collaborators in each other's do-it-yourself recoveries.

This book, in its format, hints at all forms of recovery and spiritual writing, but I am loathe to present myself as any kind of spiritual authority. I am aware of my own tendency to preach or to make totalizing statements. This is why my first person voice – the way I talk to myself about my own experience – is never far from the perspectives I am sharing. I realize that the story of ideas I am telling comes out of my own journey. They could not possibly fit any other human's story perfectly in alignment.

My preference is that you take the material presented here as a provocation to your own steps toward healing, and as an invitation to work in groups to share stories and learn what you can learn through the process. You may or many not have an important insight through this process, but you may find parts of the material useful in the contexts of your life or your life's work.

The Seven Paradigms

As I worked on myself, I explored several new territories of therapy, philosophy and epistemology. I also became intrigued with a narrative pattern, which extended to several areas of human endeavor – and, to some extent, biological endeavor – and suggested a meta-archetype for narrative work that I had not prior considered, nor encountered.

This emergent pattern, as it played itself out across various paradigms of knowing, provides a framework for considering different stories in life process, or a pathway to a storied life. Addressing certain kinds of stories as part of the passage through life stages is the oldest of narrative practices. Re-framing these

stories as a new form of ritual practice to celebrate and understand the rites of passage feels timely. This may serve no more than a personal belief system, marrying my need for defining the spiritual basis of my reflective awareness to the project of listening to, and developing stories with, others.

But hopefully all this will become clearer as I present it to you.

So, to start with, what does this look like?

A seven-by-seven grid. Seven categories to help us understand human experience broken into seven metaphors for stages in the small or large human process. Biological, Somatic, Historical, Consciousness, Life Stage, Relationships, and Narrative Archetype. The outcome of this grid is to understand the potential of defining seven areas of stories that we need to consider in living a healthy life.

I will review each section briefly in order, and then interrelate them as I build this extended metaphor, to see the useful connections. I will then present the concept of the seven life stories as an output of the process in a personal essay at the end.

BIOLOGICAL AWARENESS	EMBODIED AWARENESS	LIFE STAGE	HISTORICAL AWARENESS	EMERGENT AWARENESS	CREATIVE PROCESS	STORY FORM
Fruit/Flower	Crown	Elder	Transcendent	Transformative	Evaluating Your Method	ReBirth
Leaves	Head	Middle Adult	Restorative	Reflective	Sharing Your Insight	Resolve
Limbs	Voice	Young Adult	Integrative	Interpretive	Shaping Your Message	Reclaim
Trunk	Heart	Post-Adolescence	Ironic	Inventive	Clarifying Your Intent	Revise
Stem	Soil	Adolescence	Philosophic	Introspective	Assessing Your Resources	Reconsider
Roots	Sacrum	Childhood	Romantic	Reactive	Building Your Foundation	React
Seed	Root	Birth	Mythic	Generative	Tapping Your WellSpring	Rejoice

The seven chapters were designed to emulate the pattern of emergence suggested as a mirror to our lives.

I begin with a discussion of seeing biological process. It could be any species beyond our own that we might consider, but I start with a plant, a tree, as a central metaphor to suggest that we come of the life process that is our birthright as citizens of the planet Earth. Our starting point is knowing that we are nature. We are nature first, last, and always.

And I proceed to suggest by the second chapter that we know nature most successfully by embracing the stories of our own bodies. I see embodied consciousness as the ever closing of a false gap between our sense of ourselves as humans as above, different, better, privileged, from nature, and our deep instinct to know that nature is in every cell and the wildness of nature is ours to endlessly explore by knowing our bodies in deeper and more profound ways.

I move to the essential discussion of a life as a process, dancing with the discipline of developmental psychology, but only long enough to suggest that the rituals of all our cultures, in assisting us with passage through this mortal journey, follow a pattern of emergence that remains true from the framework of indigenous knowledge, as well as the latest theories of Western culture. We are in a process of re-framing our understanding of ourselves and connections to others through layers of knowing that move us from being in a story we cannot seem to affect, to seeing the story as something over which we have control.

This discussion jumps to how we can understand the history of knowing things. I frame this paradigm as historical awareness. I borrow and extend writer Kieran Egan's recapitulation theory to suggest that how we educate ourselves as humans in the present moment revisits the way the human race has learned to learn and gain perspective. He moves from our mythic ways of knowing to romantic, philosophic and ironic; I extend these ways of knowing to the integrative, restorative, and transcendent.

The next chapter deals with the idea of consciousness; more specifically, how gaining perspective on life changes the stories we tell. The mother story becomes the concrete example of how stories shift; we move through the various ways of knowing our mothers with greater insight about what this suggests to us in the stories about ourselves.

In the sixth chapter, the discussion turns from thinking to doing; the paradigm of creativity and the emergent pattern of moving from idea to artifact. Every person has, of course, a thousand ways to explore the process of creation; I focus on how a text emerges.

The final chapter addresses the seven stages of a story, examining the ideas of the longer form narrative as it relates to understanding how story works itself upon our lives in all the various contexts.

The seven chapters are themselves reflections of an emergence: Nature-Initiation, Body-Interaction, Development-Coming to Self, Ways of Learning-Connection, Consciousness-Insight, Creativity-Manifested Insight and Story Form-the Integral Whole. In this sense, reading them in order, as they have been taught, is appropriate. At the same time, you could also explore them in any order.

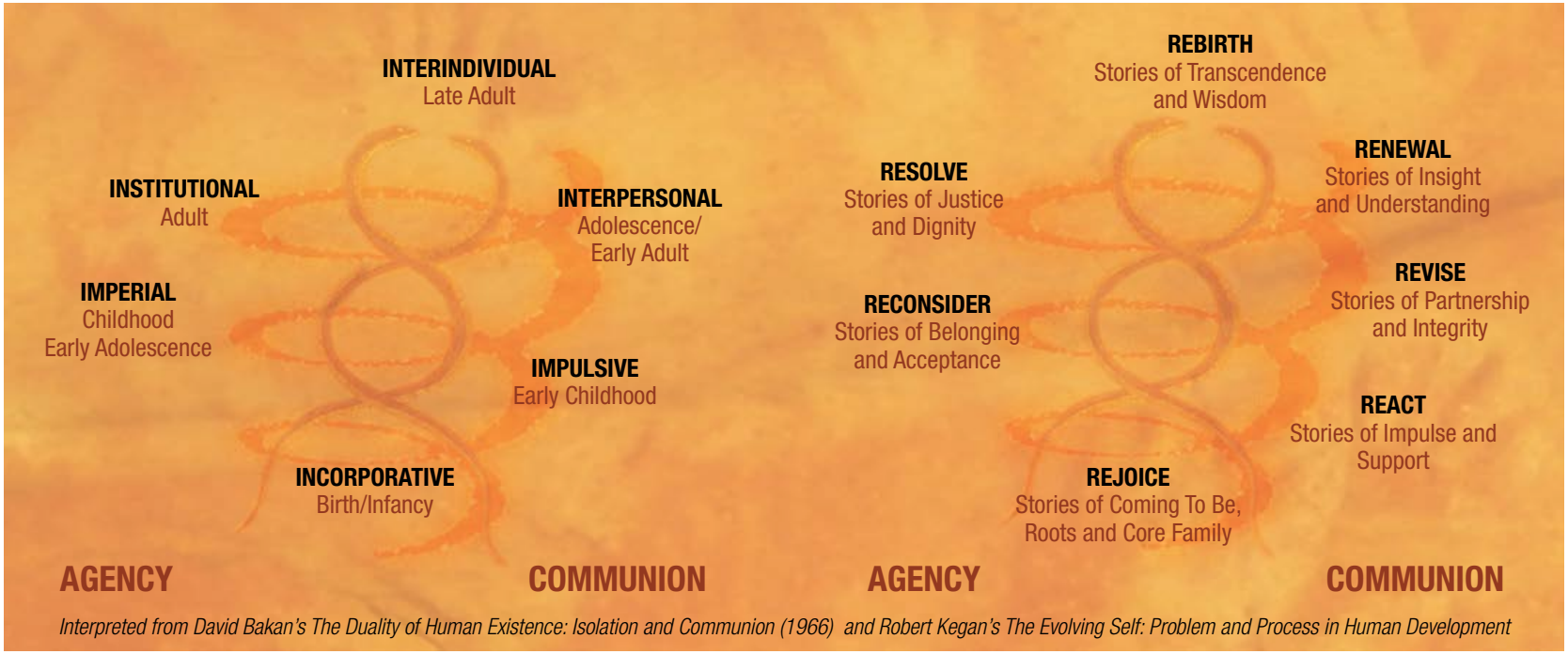
The Evolving Self Model

> *"Life is an autonomous event which takes place between the organism and the environment. Life processes do not merely tend to preserve life, but transcend the momentary status quo of the organism, expanding itself continually and imposing its autonomous determination upon an ever-increasing realm of events." (From 1959, p. 196)*
>
> *Robert Kegan quoting Carl Rogers in turn quoting Angyal from The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development, Harvard University Press.*

As I came into this work, moving through my introduction to several disciplines, particularly psychology, I found myself introduced to Robert Kegan. Kegan was at times impenetrable in the way I expect academics to be, but I could pull out of his general thesis four powerful concepts that affirmed my own experience of working with people trying to address the stories of their lives.

First was the idea he borrowed from David Bakan's *The Duality of Human Experience: Isolation and Communion*, which suggested that during our lives we are working back and forth on a pendulum between wanting to more deeply understand ourselves as unique entities (finding something more true about our essential character), and wanting to more deeply understand how we relate, usually with a desire for more successfully relating to all that is outside of our selves, but mainly other people. I found this to be essentially true for most people I had helped with story. They wanted to know why they were the way they were, and they wanted to understand how they should best relate to others, or how others defined them.

Second, Kegan, in contrast to at least my superficial reading of Erikson and other developmental psychologists informed by Freud, defined the evolving stages as more or less positive plateaus, rather than as new dilemmas. While I appreciate the idea that each stage of life brings new challenges, I prefer to think we had a mechanism to mature to deeper wisdom allowing us to face challenges.



Interpreted from David Bakan's The Duality of Human Existence: Isolation and Communion (1966) and Robert Kegan's The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development

Third, Kegan borrows the more complex idea of evolving subject-object relations from Jean Piaget, a Swiss educational psychologist of the early to mid-20th Century. We move from one way of knowing the world to another in little evolutionary leaps. Piaget called these moments Zones of Proximal Development, but we commonly call them "aha!" moments. If we are provided the right contexts, we can fully take hold of our new understanding and essentially re-structure our interactions with the world.

This works until we reach another plateau, where the old way of thinking no longer serves our lives, and we make another leap. Piaget was interested in how our frameworks for learning about and assessing the world moved from being subject to a given way of knowing to making an object to that knowing. He called these phases sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete operational, formal operational. The pre-operational child knows the secret that they are separate from their mother and the world, where

the infant just could not imagine it. The concrete operational child knows there are ways to successfully relate to the world through social signals and inhibitions, where the poor pre-operational child just does what comes naturally and cannot understand why everyone is so upset with them. For Kegan, this model provides another way of looking at the spiral of our lives as being trapped in a subject relationship to the world as we have seen it, but knowing, as we get older and we can hold more complexity, that the way we have seen the world is inadequate, and at some point, an entire new framework makes it possible to understand what we could not understand before. In my work, I had often said storywork was about unsticking what was stuck in an understanding about a story we carry along in our bodies and minds. The story is both a signpost of our current evolution and a little push around the bend of our evolution.

Fourth, the model presented wisdom and depth as being conditional within a framework; one could live happily inside the available complexity with an early stage Imperial sense of self if one was asked to operate in a purely self-interested, Machiavellian world. (It makes me think of lawyers and athletes for some reason.) But if one was trying to work out the different ways genders interrelate successfully, or de-construct race – that is to simultaneously hold fully the experience of an other and your own interests – modern cosmopolitan types in their early years (a therapist, diplomat, or average teacher in an urban school), then the self-interest model fails. No matter how successfully competitive you were in the self-interest model, you simply fail in the highly tolerant-cooperative model. Kegan goes on to suggest that you might go so far into tolerance and acceptance that you lose a sense of your own integrity, and you have to evolve into an institutional self that can hold all the prior models but stays in balance. And, finally, he suggests that the institutional balanced self still has the challenge of realizing that whatever identity construction they believe to be optimal at this high stage of knowing, it is only a construct, and any number of additional constructs could be performed with success. He admits few people reach the highest ground.

His description fits the examples of people I had met along the road, and their ability to explore deep and complex meaning. Some people were unable to move beyond an adolescent self-reference and self-serving competitiveness, but they were good at it, and the world they came from rewarded them. But these same folks suffered in relationships. Other folks were great givers and supporters in relationships, and had a sense of lived compassion, but they tended to get lost in others. A few folks showed a mature balance, which felt like a solidity, but sometimes that solidity felt as if it was becoming a touch rigid. And, finally, a few souls had a wonderfully liquid sense of

knowing that represented stability and constancy of mindfulness, but also flexibility and a wise fool perspective about all of it. This thinking is very much aligned with my own perception of my personal journey. I remain unsatisfied with the constructions of self that I have both been aware of in my past and those that I feel successfully navigated to a greater sense of health. I feel like I am just beginning to hold all of these ways of knowing, such that I can make stories out of them. And if I feel this way, then I imagine many other people do as well.

How to Use the Book

The concept of a workbook suggests that this is meant as a journey through your own reflection and writing efforts. My original concept was as a companion for the equivalent of a semester long course. Students would work alternatively with discussions around the concepts presented, and then with writing prompts as active creative writing work.

Having worked through the writing of this first edition in conjunction with a series of online webinars and a four-day retreat session, I am also encouraged that this can be used in parts as specific explorations into writing on nature, the body, life review, etc. As suggested above, the order is purposeful, but one need not stay with the order in processing the material. Various classes or various contexts can re-think the approach for their own uses. For many, visiting the essential arguments of Chapter 3 would be a useful start for understanding the theoretical argument in more detail. For others, Chapter 7 and a discussion of how the Seven Stages relates to emergence in a creative process might inform your thinking about where a larger writing, digital story, or narrative-based creative project would be effective.

While I am a believer in group process, I hope you can use the book as a very personal guide as well.

The Concept of Storywork

James Hillman, the depth psychologist, suggests in his book Healing Fiction that the process of psychological support is more art than science. Freud told stories, conveyed plots of meaning, out of his very own subjective framework, to have him and his audiences come to successful conclusions about how we understand human nature. “We are all story workers,” he suggests of the profession.

I generally work in the territory of personal storytelling. Like a psychologist, I appreciate that the first concern of professional facilitators and psychologists is that one should attempt to create a judgment-free environment. Unlike some of these professionals, I realize I am assisting people in trying to make something. No matter how gentle my approach, I

cannot avoid constructing an expectation of success, of healing, of improvement in the people I support. If I share an example, if I de-construct a narrative, if I suggest a prompt, I am leading a process and limiting possibility for the participant. If I suggest that a process should assist you in changing your perspective, I am projecting the possibility of failure, of somehow lacking something, if you as a participant do not feel the changes as significant. So all my advice should be taken with sufficient skepticism. I accept that the processes in this workbook say a great deal more about me, and my worldview, than it necessarily says about anyone else's "actual" story and sense of well-being. I sit on a mountain of belief that life makes one miserable. Suffering is all, as the Buddhists suggest. Like most "do-gooders," I have faith that somehow, if you could just find the right perspective, you would not suffer. Or you would suffer less. That simply may not be true.

Storywork for me is not about improving writing, although that might happen. It is not about passing on stories so that they are not lost, although one would hope the stories do find an archive. The work is not about reverence and ritual, really. I feel there is something sacred in any service; washing dishes or composing a symphony. I no longer feel that it promises any specific mechanism of recovery; I have more faith in the appropriate mix of counseling, physical health, pharmaceuticals if useful, and plain old love and acceptance by the folks you need to love and accept you. Mystical prayer and sacred soul work of myriad kinds might do more to lift one out of suffering than storywork.

I see storywork as the gifting of a process that has a particular set of features at the intersection of creativity and mindfulness. It is built on a belief that we have, even if the facts as presented only loosely cohere with actual events, a deep need to re-collect in the form of a story as an artifact. Not just to re-tell, but to form and finish, a considered text.

So while this book is about making art to heal, it may not work as such. It is about understanding self through reflection on systems and patterns of knowing. This is more complicated work. And it may also not work for you as a reader, discussant, or writer. If you come to this as an academic, well, I have to insist that I am a poor facilitator for scholastic endeavors. I am too much a busy practitioner to give the provenance of all my thinking, so this book cannot be appropriately validated as a dissertation. I invite all the help you can provide me to clarify this thinking and advance it, to correct me, to give me another trail to follow related to these vast subjects. As I suggested, this is the beginning of a decade long journey, and you are my collaborator. I am happy to have you on this journey.

What I mainly hope is that it helps you work out an issue in your life, even just a little. And if it does, I am guessing that means you have made some beautiful stories.

Those are stories I would love to read.

So find me at joe@storycenter.org when you are ready to share.

CHAPTER ONE

The Biological Story

When my son was four years old, he fell down and cut his eyebrow. He was okay, but his mother decided to take him to the emergency room at Kaiser-Permanente. I was sitting in a meeting in San Francisco when she called me. She was nearly hysterical. "You need to come home now! They glued his eyes shut." "Huh, what." The story made no sense. "Who? What happened?" I pieced together that the Kaiser Doctor, at the end of a shift, had skipped a normal procedure of getting a nurse to assist in applying "skin glue" to my son's wound, and had inadvertently spilt the glue, a transparent liquid, across both my son's eyes. He couldn't open his eyes; the lids were glued shut. It could not be fixed; it would simply take a couple of weeks for the glue, assisted by ongoing washing and light application of mineral oil, to wear off.

I arrived home about the time they returned from the hospital. His mom was ragged and exhausted, but my son was resilient. We could even laugh a bit about it.

Through the smallest gap in one eye he could see just enough to get around with some help. And the first thing he chose to do was to go to the backyard and start climbing a tree. I thought it so odd, this blind child wanting so badly to test himself by climbing up and out on a limb. The solace the tree was providing was clear; he was smiling and happy as he explored around. It was as if he was saying, "I am still a boy, I can still connect with the world, and even make myself calm, through this testing, this embracing, the energy of a tree."

I am still intrigued by this image of my blinded son in the tree.

The Biological Metaphor

We humans are first and foremost creatures of nature. We emerged as a branch of simian gaining some evolutionary advantage by dropping from trees. But watch any child approach any tree, and you might guess we never fell that far. We are tree huggers, tree climbers, tree lovers, and tree breeders and arborists of all kinds.

The tree is a central metaphor for life. Almost all human cultures find the tree at the center of their myths. All plants have components that symbolize any number of processes, feelings, representations of awareness – the seed, the stem, the flower. But the tree as a whole, the expansive deciduous trees in their cycles, the towering evergreens in their majesty, durability and longevity, and in their parts – the gnarled trunks of the fig, the exploding beauty of the magnolia, the fecundity of the fruit tree – provide an endless array of references for our thoughts on our place and relationship to the world as we move through life.

The fact that biological process of a tree can be divided handily into seven components is useful as a starting point of this story. What meaning we can extend from these seven metaphors, as it applies to making stories, and to the stages of stories we need in our lives?

Sycamore

Terry Tempest Williams

Play Movie

Our first story is by the award winning nature writer and activist. Those who know her work, know that birds, and their habitats, trees included, are a particular passion in her life and writing. She uses her observational insight to suggest many things about biological systems, life, and the possibility of deep spiritual communion with nature.

This story came out of an abbreviated version of a Storycenter workshop where the writer has the task to write about one image. She begins with an incantation of the tree's look and parts, it's seeds and role in the life cycle.

But the story places the tree in the backyard of a cherished place, her grandparent's home, and suggests the point of view of the image, is a singular strong memory. A grandmother washing dishes, a scene repeated season after season, but we are gifted with the sense of imagining her cleaning, but her mind dreaming. Of what, we can all imagine what those dreams would be for us, or our grandmothers.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *Here we have the barest of stories, a prose poem of 100 words, where the biological components of a tree become time, become permanence. In this first part, what thoughts emerged for you about a single backyard tree.*

2. *As the story steps outside to inside, from what is beyond the window, as grandmother, as kitchen, as the sound of dishes being washed, emerged, how did your own perspective change?*

3. *The image of the "puzzle piece" bark tree, and square framing of each window pane, evoke a particular relationship between organic and constructed worlds, how did you feel about this tension between the natural and the human?*

The Story of A Tree

The tree grows from seed to giant. The tree's seed has within it this enormously powerful symbol of the life force. The acorn is all potential. The mystery of its ascension to the heavens over time cannot help but stir our wonder. And many tree species mark time to maturity in parallel to the life span of a human; to plant the sapling for a child and return to the shade of the fully grown tree as an elder is the oldest of rituals. Trees become our story as we imagine our lives spreading out: each choice, each relationship, a new limb; each new piece of knowledge, a leaf; each flower, an awareness; the fruit, our wisdom returning us to the life cycle as it drops its seed to the earth.

We see ourselves in the tree, and we see time. But we also see an energetic process, and that is not only ascent, but equally descent. The seed burrows down before it heads up to exit the soil; the air it breathes, the water it absorbs, the light and heat it processes cycle down through the plant as bio-chemical process.

We can describe the tree's process of growing up, making a space for itself in the canopy of the forest, as a perfect metaphor for our own struggle to surface into the world as a unique soul, facing out to the world in community. But we also understand that the pulling down process is equally critical. The grounding of the tree – the deep and critical sourcing by the root system of the nutrient organic matter; the drinking up of the moisture, the soaking in of earth's warmth, or the earth's coolness – all of these processes assure the health of the tree. As with our own stories, our desires to grow up and out seem to succeed in equal proportion to our successful grounding, to the health of the process of our rooting. And as we move through life, projecting ourselves into the world, this downward energy becomes precisely how we remain in healthy balance.

In many therapeutic and spiritual processes, describing the connection to the past, to a source, to depth, imagined as a sub-surface even in the term sub-conscious – these references speak to the internal narrative of a life cycle. The energy that leads us out into the world toward a higher individual and communal consciousness, to eternal and immortal interconnectedness, to the godhead in the sun and sky, is always balanced with the sense of returning to source, of awareness of decay and death, of acceptance of limitation, of the soil and the underworld. We go up to transcend life; we go deep down to comprehend death.

Seven Stages of a Tree

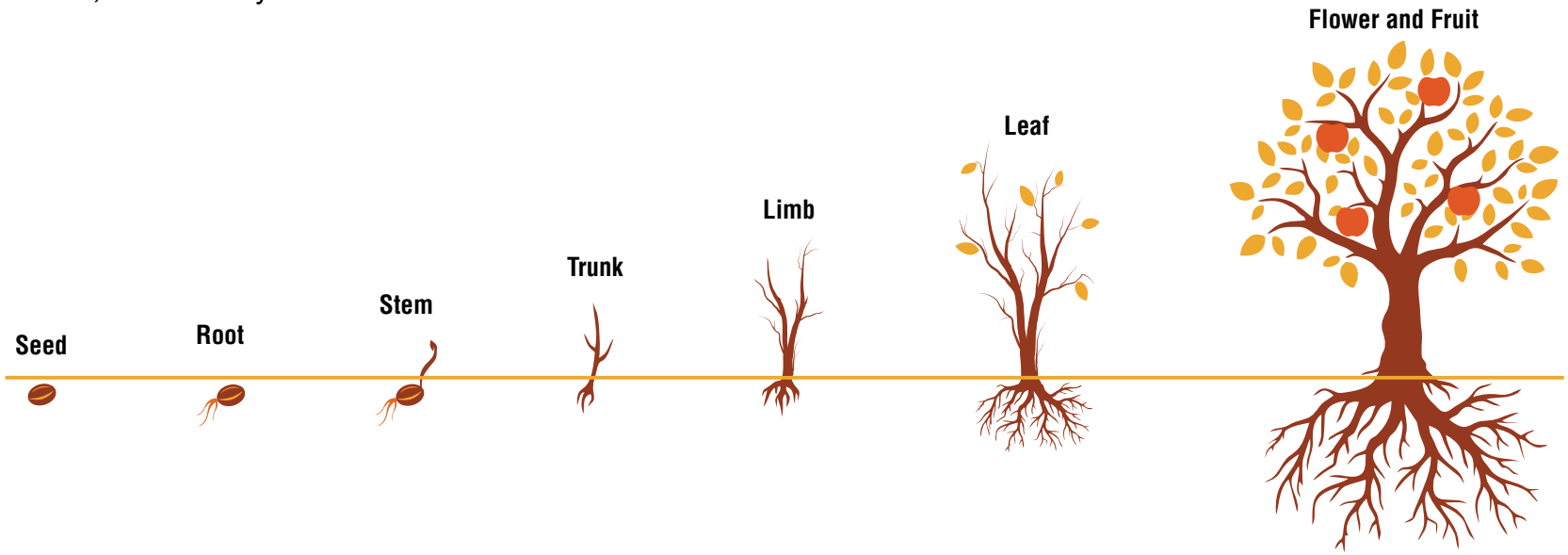
We can simultaneously hold in our minds an entire life experienced, as a system of inter-related systems, and each separate phase of our lives as a system in itself. I see the story of my life as the story of a tree –

the total tree-ness, as well as the attributes of my identity as a species and unique identity given the specific DNA and the context of my development. But I also hold the story of my seed self. Not just, "Once upon a time I was a seed," but now that I am a sapling, being a seed means this to me; as a 100 foot tree…it means something else.

The goal of this book is to imagine a regimen of ritual story processes that one moves through over time, making sense of a life stage. Part of the argument is that in our traditional cultures, we understood these passage narratives, and in the modern world, we have forgotten some or all of them, so we cannot tell them in time, we can only address them in re-consideration.

And we cannot simply map the indigenous narrative to our current lives – the lives that work through the explosive awareness of the scientific world that we are spec of a spec of a spec across the debris of the Big Bang. We have to make new ritual stories, new recitations of re-considered experience, mythologizing those experiences so we can stand straight and tall, with dignity. Like a tree.

The seven stage stories are suggested by a tree's growth process and component parts. Symbolically, I hope this biological progression serves well as a starting framework for all the other frameworks to come.



Seed

In all our stories, the beginning plays a central role – the spark of unique life, the cell that comes before other cells with the defining DNA, the point of conception or initiation into being, the birthing narrative, the source. We imagine that all that will become us, our unique living entity, might be there in that single emergent moment.

To deeply know the seed, then, is to deeply know the thing it will become. Close examination of the characteristics of the seed's genealogy reveals that it comes with a large number of predetermined characteristics. Examination of the fruit from which it came, the context into which it might fall or be distributed, and how it was predisposed to survive and germinate tells us a great deal about the tree it will become.

In this symbolic sequence, the seed also represents that which is pre-conscious in our stories. At the deepest level, beneath the surface of who we become, is this idea of our soul identity. That identity may be immediately evident in the person's character, or it may, like a tree, take time to shape itself against an environment. Many stories work best when what they are suggesting in the inception turns out to be surprisingly unlike the resolution and insight we gain at the end, so it is with the seed as symbol.

The seed transposed to our life process stories also suggests fated experience, the nature which nurture cannot undo. Or seen from another angle, we may have spent an entire life trying to shape ourselves to be what others expect of us, to have our stories told for us, but underneath, at the deepest level of our sub-conscious knowing, we suspect that we were not following our true nature – we were a Cypress and not a Walnut. Most stories about identity, at each life stage, tussle in different ways with these issues. Even if my parents say I am one way, that doesn't feel true? Am I who I am supposed to be? Do I have to be this way? What is it that I am called or meant to be or to do? The only answer is to try and go back and read the signs of the seed.

As the initial stage maps across these different schema, there is also a sense that the seed represents the cosmic beginning, genesis itself. From the mythic-symbolic perspective, being born has profound impact on our psyche. We move from the womb into the world, into the land of giants as a small and completely fragile mammal, experiencing profound terror as well as profound love. The shadow of the experience of infancy, understood from any number of perspectives, falls on every one of our stories, and I cannot count the number of stories I have heard where someone discovers something new about themselves by gaining new information or insight about their pre-conscious selves. In the end,

we cannot easily understand how the tree stood tall without addressing the legacy of the seed experience.

Root

The root here refers to three aspects of the symbol: the alimentary source, the formational identity and the substructure. In a plant's roots are the critical systems for transferring water and nutrients, the food of the entity, which parallel the mother or parent in animals. The roots are also where the beginning of identity takes shape, whereas seeds might suggest difference in species or type. When the plant begins to expand out from the seed in tendrils that become the root system and the stem, the plant begins to become a distinct and unique entity.

As a substructure, the root system is associated with survival and a core strength for all growth that follows.

It is no surprise that rootedness (versus up-rootedness) has become concomitant with emotional health. In our mind's eye, we visualize the initial stages of plant life as both a spreading out and a reaching down mechanism. Roots are attaching themselves to the world in order to be in the world, and the strength of these attachments is critical to future health. But these attachments are not thought of as part of the visible identity, the identity above the surface, where the tree or ego establishes itself in the world. This sense of sub-surface or sub-conscious support is the invisible component of our identity, the reaching out into a nurturing soil that either sustained and supported our healthy development, or if we were not so lucky, hindered and disrupted our healthy growth.

In this sense, like the seed, the root metaphor has a mythic dimension of large, unknown or unseen forces. The mother as a root metaphor is the most complicated of all metaphors in our psychologies. All our myths have that component of post-creation negotiation with the mother, the mother as nurturer or destroyer. Perhaps all our lives are re-negotiations of the dilemma of the mother's (or parent's) ego surrounding our identity so completely that it feels like a web beneath our feet, shoring us up in many ways, but also holding us in a place.

So critical is this stage in all our stories that, arguably, the entire psychological enterprise of the first half of the 20th Century – Freudian or Jungian – was an assessment of the root and seed complications, either the unavoidable complications of being a species that takes a dozen plus years to mature to self hood, or related to the damage done when the initiation and early root contexts were insufficient. Psychologists are not quite as focused on the root system of early childhood as they once were (it is possible that nature or the seed, and later natural mechanisms of resiliency, are as critical to self-understanding), but

the validity of re-visiting childhood as a self awareness process is not questioned.

No matter how many storytellers come through our workshops with the idea of leaving this part of their past out of the narratives, there is always language that suggests the formative experience is still the filter. As self-archaeologists they are digging around the roots to find that missing part of their stories. The clue is somewhere down in the soil.

Stem

The stem refers to the first visible individuation of a life process. A plant breaks ground, takes a deep breath of oxygen, feels the sun, and begins cycling the energy from above as well as below. The plant then becomes itself, a little tree with its first leaves, and has an identity that is recognizable and has function in its environment.

In this metaphor, we are speaking about preadolescence in the life cycle; the ego becomes aware of itself and stakes out a claim on the world as a unique individual, separate from its peers, but also separating from its rooted self, differentiating itself from its parents.

While this metaphor becomes blended in with the mature self of the trunk, it is helpful to separate the process of becoming who you are from the process of claiming who you are. The stem is still enormously vulnerable, pre-sexual, and in the shadow of the adult trees. But the stem knows the differences from itself and others and it has learned the ropes of survival, about what storms feel like, and how to hold moisture when it becomes dry.

Trunk

The trunk is the stage where core identity is fully formed and the tree becomes a young adult. The tree has survived the stages of development at which it has been most vulnerable and now counts itself as a true member of its community. It becomes aware of itself as a tree, as something that lives in the community of trees, the forest, and makes a space for itself in its ecology.

Even as the tree realizes it is fully independent, it becomes more oriented to interdependence; it can sense that it is part of an orchard of similar trees with gendered differentiation and it becomes part of a reproducing community. It also recognizes the differences it has with others in the world, that there are other trees and other species that are integrated into the world it inhabits that it relies upon and that rely upon it. It has ties to its world.

And inherent to this particular stage is a notion that its center, the core of its strength, is held in this part of

the total being of the tree. The trunk gives the tree its fundamental dignity.

Limb

The extension of the tree into the world is through its limbs. The tree offers its connection by spreading out, by broadcasting itself to the world. This metaphor extends to the experience of middle adult life. The tree passes each season growing and forming new connections, sensing the world in new ways, and experiencing change through all the processes of its life energies. The limbs have inside them a communicative memory, sensing all the birds, the animals, the insects, the wind, the world that it comes into contact with and has marked it.

It has grown to pro-create and the limbs hold the promise of reproduction from their hanging fruit, even as they shelter the young saplings that grow beneath it. The limbs intertwine with other trees; they shape the growth of others and are shaped by the connection with others.

And yet the limbs are aware that they are parts of a tree that grow weak and begin to show age and that over time they bend or die or break. The limbs show the tree that it awaits mortality. The tree learns to negotiate with decline through its limbs, to express itself in character and form more fully, providing a model for the younger trees of how to travel through the life process fully expressed as a being.

Leaf

Here the leaf acts as a symbol of the completed cycle of growth, of full maturity. The leaf, or the leaves of the fully grown tree, come to represent the final full identity, the way the tree truly is in the world, expressed in the unique total being of the tree. The leaf becomes a symbol of the depth of wisdom of the elder, as expressed in completion and deep self-awareness or consciousness.

Leaves have appeared from the first growth of the sapling and they are critical to life, providing for the main system of aspiration, but in this metaphor they are also the source of inspiration. Leaves, at least in deciduous trees, change with seasons; they know the world and adjust, letting go of one way of knowing just in time to prepare for the long change of winter. And they know to start again anew.

As the elder moves toward greater self-wisdom, they come to fully appreciate the cycles of their life. They have seen children grow and become parents themselves; they have seen parents die and have known others among them to fall. They come to see that all the comings and goings are not things to be resisted, but rather to be appreciated. The changes are welcome – even the change of death.

Flower and Fruit

In this tree as a symbol of life process, the flower and fruit become symbols not of the reproductive cycle, but of the transfiguration of death, all that is transcendent, and the direct link between the letting go of life and rebirth...of enlightenment.

As the tree dies and rots, it feeds the earth; it feeds all future generations. The elder, in facing death fully, has the potential for spiritual re-awakening. They can be completely present to listen to the stories that come out of their deepest self and fully express forgiveness, love and compassion to themselves and to the world. The echo of this awareness feeds us all. In our deepest myths, in most of our most cherished narratives, this voice of the person who has surrendered themselves to death, whether elder or not, always promises redemption with the processes of life, with the relationships that disappoint or diminish us. Holding the image of the flower, imagining the taste of all that is sweet in a fruit, is being present to the extraordinary gift that is life.

The Tree's Story in Context

On a major thoroughfare near our house, the City of Berkeley long ago planted rows of trees. The trees attempted to grow limbs, as they would, about at the level of the average windshield of a car, or later a truck, or a bus, etc. – in any event at an inconvenient spot that would cause damage to a passing vehicle. So somewhere along the line, I am sure quite early, the tree surgeons came and whacked the limbs, again and again, to assure that a wayward limb would not obstruct traffic. And now the trunks of the trees have numerous lumps, tumorous and ugly, on their sides for eight to ten feet up the tree, before the limbs are allowed their lovely upward growth.

I see these trees nearly daily on my route to and from home and work. And for some reason I imagine a row of children, not that different than me. Instead of growing up in an organic context to surroundings, I was cut off from my natural expressions of self as a convenience to an industrial, a mechanistic, landscape. I was made uniform. Well, sort of. All those tumors and lumps remind me of my coming of age. While I managed, at some level, to flourish beyond childhood, achieving a bit of individual grace, when I look back down on the scars, it is always sad and painful. I am reminded of what I might have been.

The aspect of a tree as part of an ecosystem, as an individual in context, is also part of the relevant narrative potential of these seven stages of being.

The bio-chemical energy flows, the tree grows and is shaped by a genetic identity, by the internal health of its emergent biological systems, but also completely by the context of its situation, its environment. What the tree is, as an individual tree, is worn through time,

the markings of its interactions with the world shaping form, surface, and the very vitality of its being. And as with all life forms, the essence and the context flourish when the tree is both completely itself and in total balance with its context. The story of a blissful, happy, content, successful, peaceful, exuberant tree is one of the extreme fortune of being the right tree, at the right place, at the right time. And so it goes for us.

Mapping these symbols to a new sense of a narrative pattern suggests that we do not just see linear ascension, the becoming, but we also see the energetic process of declension, of the deepening of roots even as we grow, of the retreat into stasis in the face of trauma, the letting go of our identities as we cycle through seasons and years. It is not all up, it is preparing for the cycle of giving fruit and seed to the next generation, it is constantly returning in the very essence of our relation to the living subsoil that provides us life, which we feed through time with the loss of parts of ourselves, and in the end return fully as the dead organic matter that provides the basis for the emergence of the following generations.

While it serves as representation of an emergent process, a narrative of identity, it also serves as a reminder of interconnectivity. It seems that the starting point of imagining a story of human experience, by imagining the story of a plant's existence, of a plant's experience, is the best way to round the circle of this narrative. As you will discover, part of my ambition is a dialogue about restorative awareness, about what it will take in human consciousness to get us back to the ground of being as a fellow citizen of this earth with all our other species.

By starting with a tree, I am suggesting that this is where we will return in the cycle, to an understanding of our tree-ness, as deep as an understanding of our otherness from other species. Western culture's insistence in dominance over nature is the entry point to a fundamental disharmony that now expresses itself as imminent collapse of all biological systems on the planet. If nothing else, our mapping of our own life experience process, of our identities in process, to a natural metaphor is a reminder that where we must head is a symbiotic relationship with all other species, that we are just another tree as an individual, and as a community of the human species, we are no more important, and no less, than all the forests on the planet.

Springboards for Life

Cavanaugh Nwese

Play Movie

A community activist in Houston, Texas, Cavanaugh captures the broad metaphor of a plant as both life process and a commitment to bring wholeness, health and self-determination to his community. Creating the Marcus Garvey Liberation Garden (http://www.mglg.net) connected to his faith community was an act of positive change for Cavanaugh and other community members. The seriousness of the issue of self-reliance and self determination had a long history within this area of Southeast Houston.

The general stance and tone, however, echoes across the historical struggle for land and control of the means of self-sufficient economic life for African Americans since slavery. We feel it in his voice, seeds of change. Cavanaugh's style mixes storytelling and inspirational persuasion, the challenging call to action and poetic reflection. His story exemplifies the way natural metaphors ground us in our passions as individuals, but also the communal tasks of practical social change.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *The seed metaphor returns several times in the story. How does the meaning shift slightly in each usage?*

2. *As he extends the additional metaphors of growth, roots, leaves, flowers; in what ways does the growth of their community project blend with the natural metaphors?*

3. *What ways do the specific meaning of the flower, and the idea evolving insight, or rebirth, work as the story closes?*

Questions

1. *When you think about an emergent biological process – a tree, our own lives – growth is complex and fluid. In this discussion, we are suggesting that the parts of growth can be separated. Have you considered your life, or the process of growth, as separated into stages? If so, how has that been useful? If not, what other metaphors have you found useful to talk about growth and change?*

2. *As you read through the various stages, was there a particular stage or relationship that triggered a response or insight about your life? As in, struggling to know your true self as seed, becoming rooted in family, emerging as a person in the world as stem, becoming strongly yourself in relation to others as trunk, branching out in connection to community and your own impact in the world, reaching a flourishing self as leaves, or moving through a stage of rejuvenation as flower and fruit.*

3. *Overall health and well-being is often associated with a positive relationship to nature and natural processes. How has nature been important to your ability to stay balanced and aware?*

4. *Trees and humans exist in ecological systems. We are defined as much by our interdependence as by our singularity. In what ways are the stages about questions we have as individuals? In what ways are the questions we have in relationship to others and the larger world?*

Prompt 1 – The Sacred Forest

Trees live in an ecology, and that ecology is shared by countless species, including humans. Many of us have a story about our encounter with the sacred in a forest, about the passage through something powerful, or an awakening moment, or a depth of connection, as we wandered through, or sat, or camped, or explored a forest or wooded place. Or perhaps it is a natural environment of another kind, with other botanical or animal species. Or maybe you have had little direct experience with wilderness, but you have encountered it through books, television, films, or the internet, and you imagined yourself entering the woods.

How have you been changed by the sacred in nature? Tell us a moment when you felt connected, moved or transformed through the encounter. And share, if you can, a single statement of two sentences about what that encounter has inspired you to do in the way you live or the way you relate, sustain, or develop a healthy relationship to the natural world.

Prompt 2 – Where You Stand

At this point in your life, where do you stand? Imagining your own life cycle as an emergent process, explore where you are situated in the continuum suggested by the seven stages of the tree.

Using one of the metaphors implicit in the appropriate stage, write about how it feels to be who you are now, standing up in relationship to your world. Is there a moment recently where you were aware of your standing in your life?

CHAPTER TWO

Our Body's Story

"Mythologies are products of the human imagination, which in turn is grounded in the energies that animate the organs of the human body, and since these have not significantly changed since the appearance of Cro-Magnon Man, c. 40,000 B.C., there can be recognized in the mythologies and associated ceremonials of all mankind certain themes and images that are constant."

Joseph Campbell

I entered this journey at the beginning of 2010 deeply invested in change. I had stopped drinking and taken up yoga and meditation. As I would finish my yoga session, I would sit for meditation. My thoughts turned inward. After many weeks, I found it useful to meditate on a simple prayer, scanning through the parts of my body. From my hips to the top of my head, through each of the seven parts of my body associated with the Chakra system, and down again.

With the support of my ancestors, I can support my family and friends.

With the support of my family and friends, I can support myself.

By supporting myself, I can open my heart to all living things in compassion.

Through my open heart, I can speak to truth and justice.

By speaking truth, I can envision my future without illusion.

By seeing the world without illusion, I can imagine transcendence.

By imagining transcendence, I become one with all things.

And then reversing down.

In becoming one with all things, I see the world more clearly.

By seeing the world clearly, I live in truth.

By living in truth, my heart is open.

With my heart open, I can love who I have become.

Through loving myself, I can serve my family and friends.

By serving others, I honor those who came before me.

By honoring my ancestors, I remain rooted and in balance.

I might change the prayer slightly, but the pattern was the same. Through this process I accomplished two things. I became aware of my body in a meditation similar to the body scan of many mindfulness practices. I listened to see if there was a particularly uncomfortable or sore part of my body, and I would

use this meditation to imagine a healing effect of some kind.

Through my studies, my work in therapy, and my bodywork practices, I began to feel the parts of my body that were carrying stories associated with various difficulties and dysfunctions in my life. I found that by imagining my body as a map of my values, I could re-frame those stories and project a deeper sense of knowing about what I carried in my body and what my body had to tell me.

Our Body's Story

Like most guys from Texas, I always thought that the most important thing was strength and durability. A favorite game of mine in elementary school involved a "Bull Run." Twenty kids would be in the middle of a friendly recess football game, the bell would ring for us to head back to school, and the game began. They threw me the ball. The simple goal was to tackle Joe – meaning that everyone on both sides had the task of bringing me down – and my goal was to not be brought down and to cross the goal line. And, raging like a mad bull, I would fight through a dozen kids trying to tackle me, a symbol of my school boy pride that I usually could not be toppled.

I would have continued to play football through high school and into college had I not had the sense that Texas football was a religion more than a sport. I couldn't quite adjust my hippie alternative ideology with the Christian quasi-militarism inherent in the culture. Wrestling was how I expressed some of the need to embody my emotions for the rest of high school, but by college I found myself working on a long term project of separating my head from my heart and body. I did my best to keep my heart in shape, always with an exercise routine, but in retrospect I see that I came to live mainly in my head, and how my head fit in with my body was a story I could not seem to tell.

Fifty years on, the crisis mentioned in the Preface and the battles of being father, co-worker, community member, grown-up dude has forced me to consider re-integration.

Although my practices in meditation and yoga have evolved, I am still a novice in every sense. But as I dropped into my body and into studying the basis of the esoteric embodied philosophies that inform so much of the current yoga craze, I began to see many parallels in the idea of the stages of life experience and story, and the issues of our bodies and our health.

My own therapeutic work had me increasingly focusing on identifying parts of my body that held loss and grief, frustration and anger, and learning how working through these issues was greatly supported

through the more conscious discipline of meditation and yoga. And I was aware that in our work at the Center for Digital Storytelling, we needed to consider "somatic" or body-centered practices as informing our work more consistently.

Of all the discussions in this book, this is the one where I feel most vulnerable. I am aware that I am dancing at a metaphysical edge where esoteric and mystical traditions become jumbled together with evolving western scientific models of mind-body health and well-being. To add to my vulnerability, as I journey into these territories as a literature, I am left with a feeling that there is no emergent consensus about how all of this works.

Whether you are reading the wisdom traditions of various cultures or the new age "gurus" who hang a shingle in this trade, from the evidence-based alternative health and healing scientists to the whole new generation of mind-body and mindfulness theorists, there are countless different perspectives on how to describe these processes. Precisely because I am aware that the vast sets of mountain ranges of historical and current thinking on these subjects is so profound and so inherently subjectively driven, I almost left this out of this discussion.

But in the end I could not, because all my research on story and life process heads me back into the body and the relationship between our bodies and our stories.

The Emotion Molecule

My dear friend Jo Carson, the late East Tennessee playwright and community artist, was bitten by a recluse spider and nearly crippled. Through the discovery of Reiki therapy, she found a way to recover and wrote about it in a book called Spider Speculations. The book's central idea is that the way stories heal us perhaps links to a very specific biological process.

Carson borrowed from the writing of a former National Institute of Health neuroscientist and biologist, Candace Pert, who posited a theory growing out of the identification of certain *Molecules of Emotion* (as was the title of Pert's book). Pert had in fact identified a specific neuro-peptide, the opiate receptor, that demonstrated that the body did have very specific ways that it "stored" emotional experience. For Carson, a playwright who pioneered a powerful approach to community-based storywork and play development, the theory suggested a rationale for the transformative role of story on repairing bodies that suffered from various stresses.

The argument was that the evidence of this Opiate receptor's role in the body explained one aspect of

chronic illness. The body's flight or fight response sends off a signal to prepare our bodies for extreme exertion, or to absorb a blow. The opiate receptor comes into use to help our bodies adjust, from heart rate to muscle tension to increased endocrinal secretions, and recover. In the course of a normal experience of a normal animal, the shift of our biochemistry would simply filter out through our systems. We would calm down, then go back to grazing peacefully. But, unfortunately for us thinking mammals, we have the ability to replay the trauma again and again, and each time the remembering, in our dreams or in our conscious remembering, essentially sets off the same trauma response. We come to rely on these opiate receptors, and the stress wears down our bodies. This eventually makes us sick.

Pert's quest to find a specific peptide (which she called Peptide T) – to pharmacologically adjust our tendency to carry stress and over burden our immune system – in the end proved illusory. But it suggested that there is much science yet to be done to understand the mind-body relationship, and the role of countless historical and non-pharmacological interventions like creative work and story, to help us re-frame our stories of trauma.

Whether we yet have the biological science to prove it, Jo Carson suggested a valid idea. By re-framing a story, particularly a story that saw us as victim – as a class of the permanently damaged and disabled – to a story of someone who experienced trauma, as someone who is so much more than our experience of loss or tragic injury, we can get better. Once we re-frame the difficult stories of our lives, literally by speaking them out, by writing them down, by performing them or turning them into art, our bodies can release the pathological energy that carries with it increased risk for disease. We get both emotionally and physically healthier.

On a near weekly basis, I help people share stories. And each time a workshop is over and the stories are projected on the wall of the studio or classroom, I see people go through this process, this stepping away from the events, the observation of the events, the hurt, the loss, as something else, now put into a box called a story and stacked a bit further from their soul on some corner cupboard of their memory. If we can keep our stories at the right distance, it is much easier for us to drop into this moment, into the people we are right now, and let ourselves become a bit freer to dance into our lives.

I have always appreciated this sense of story lifting us up a little psychologically. But I am increasingly certain that we can make ourselves physically better as well.

Snapshot

Leah Potts

Play Movie

Leah tells a story about facing her body's failure, or at least a period of healing. The world that the able-bodied takes more or less for granted, appeared no longer hers. As much as anything the story provokes the idea of passage that a disability through traumatic injury sends a person.

Do our body's define us? Is hope in healing, in recovery, an act of faith? The border between hope and acceptance is never a clear one? How does one redefine wholeness, when the body you knew, the body you saw as self, is not ever going to be the body you are working with? These are all questions implicit in Leah's story.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *Leah's early awareness of her hospital experience was her concern about how people who react to her, and specifics of some of the reactions, that she was "stuck" in a category of projected identity? How does this story suggest something about the relationship between our bodies and our perceived identity?*

2. *At all ages, all levels of ability or disability, we are survivors of a perception of limitation. Something we wish we could do with our bodies, or something we once could do with our bodies, is not available to us (or at least that is our strong perception). How does Leah's story make you aware of the conversation you have with your own sense of loss or limitation?*

3. *We all naturally fear injury. Those of us who have not passed through a journey similar to Leah's, can not imagine the resources required to face the difficulties of a life with such enormous new challenges and limitations. Leah's wakes up into a new world with a serious disability, but her story, told at some time after, suggests she wants to remember those first days not as just tragic and sad, but as a signpost of her journey forward. What does this shift in perspective suggest to you?*

Narrating Our Lives to Externalize Our Traumas

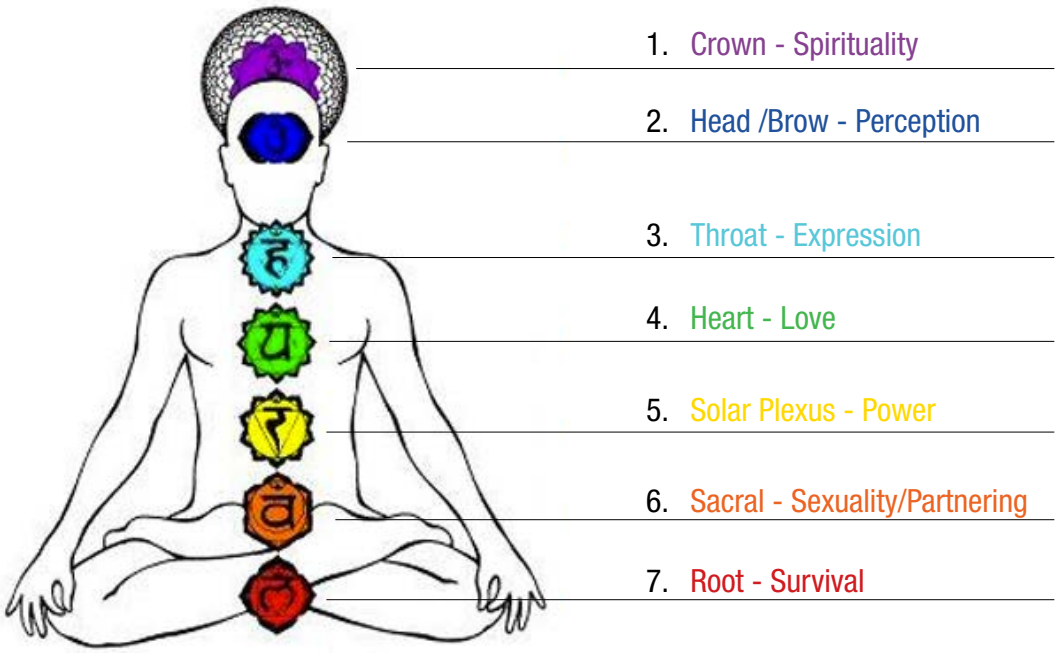
Around the time I ran into Jo's story as one of a close colleague in the community arts, I also began reading Michael White and others in the field of Narrative Therapy. The perspective of this community, again summed up in gross simplification, was that the encapsulation of an experience of a pathology as an "other," as something outside of our core identity, helps us to heal. If you have an issue, something that is problematic for you, by working with a therapist you can create an externalized narrative, a characterization of the experience, for example, describing bouts of rage as "the monster," or bed wetting as "the situation." The characterization of the event or issue becomes something that is not our essential selves, but an externalized thing we do. Ostensibly, this allows a person to step out of the story of the problem and tackle the issue inside a new story with a greater sense of agency and control.

The embodied component of this is brought into processes like Playback Theater, drama therapy, and dance therapy as the re-performance of the context or the way the trauma was carried, which provides the same externalization process so we can see ourselves in the story as a character and hopefully dis-identify with the act of being traumatized. The idea, as far as I understand it, is similar to Jo Carson's; once we re-frame the story, our bodies can release the pathologies and we get both emotionally and physically healthier.

Our Soul's Anatomy

In her book Anatomy of the Spirit, Carolyn Myss explains that she once wanted to be a journalist, but that she discovered she was not called to distanced objectivity. And through a journey where she became aware of the worldview of Athabascan Native emotional and therapeutic healing, she came to find she had the gift of intuitive diagnosis, an ability to assess, with great accuracy, the physical ailments of others, by assessing their total being and energy.

I admit that in having never met a intuitive healer, I was suspect of the relationship between the reading of energy and solid diagnosis. Myss provides story after story of how the process works and, more to the point, suggests mechanisms for increasing all our sensitivity to how we observe the way people carry the burden of life and the story of how their health develops over their life. So I decided to start noticing the relationship between my own aches and pains, and the complaints or health emergencies related to others, and the stories that an aspect of character told me about myself and others.



My issues are all over my body: forever sore and stiff legs and hips, discomforts and nagging issues with my stomach and digestion, a sense of weighted discomfort in my neck and shoulders. As I explored the way I hold energy in these places, I suddenly started down territories of looking at early childhood and adolescence, of reflecting on my life choices, and through the focus in deep meditation, surfaced stories long forgotten. I immediately began to journal about those stories and began to lose some of the sense of discomfort in those parts of my body, but, more importantly, I began to take care of those parts of my body, as if I had re-discovered their very existence.

Myss subtitles her book *The Seven Stages of Power and Healing*. And I have taken to heart the fundamental relationship she suggests between how we have processed life stage experience and the health issues we have in the different parts of the body where we hold those stories.

I have taken aspects of the Myss perspective and re-framed it (also referring to other authorities in relationship to body-centered analysis). I have set these perspectives in the context of stories to be told and related this to the schemata of life process or life stages presented here. What I want to explore in my storywork are ways to unleash these stories that are held in our bodies, to find a way to liberate the stories that are waiting to be freed from the muscle, the organs, the nerves, that are being held and generating a poison to our system.

Inherent in her view, as in mine, is that surfacing of story in relation to body are things we always knew to do. In all traditional cultures, the rituals of life passage, the ceremonial recognition of life's struggles and losses, involved a somatic, a body-engaged experience; one danced out the pain, one explored the change through communal touch, food and drink, song and quiet-but-aware sitting. These actions were built into our mythic narratives; the stories showed us ways to see a way out of re-traumatization, to put loss behind us, and to re-claim ourselves by an embrace of grief.

Because of the Cartesian split between mind and body as our culture moved from the mythic stage to the rational stage, with a great emphasis on the analytical over the emotional, we began to forget our embodied selves. More to the point, modern consumer culture simply alienates us from entire systems of natural order, of the process of where our food comes from and the effort to cultivate it, of the processes of entertaining each other through movement, song and story. We consume through machines, and our bodies suffer. And the cancers, and the weight, and the addictions, and the sense of depression or fatigue, whatever we associate as the particular anti-blessings of modern life, are the price we have paid. Now we are wanting to change that story as well.

As I read a number of authors on these subjects, worked with a very body-centered therapist, and began a limited study of the Thai Medical approach to bodywork and massage, I became more and more interested in the way my body holds stories and in experimenting a bit in how journaling and writing about my body actually assisted my healing.

I have come to accept a fundamental relationship between how we have processed life stage experience and the health issues we have in the different parts of the body in which we hold those stories.

In looking at the seven parts of the body, associated with the seven Chakras of the Buddhist and Hindu energy traditions, I have taken aspects of various arguments of their relationship to life stages, issues and ailments, strengths and inadequacies, etc. and

re-framed these ideas into my own schemata. I have set these perspectives in the context of stories to be told. In exploring the body as storywork, I want to see if I can help to unleash some of the stories that are held in our bodies – to liberate the stories that are waiting to be freed from the muscle, the organs, the nerves, the bones, that are being held with us, and perhaps generating a poison to our system.

With the great emphasis on the analytical over the emotional, with the loss of embodied ritual, with the learning of shame and disconnection in our mammal-natured selves, some of us forgot how to care for our bodies over the course of a life. Now is a good time to reclaim the whole story of our embodied selves.

The Seven Stages of Our Body

In Chapter One, we envisioned the tree as a map of our life stories. In Chapter Two, the tree becomes our spine. This works at first glance at the anatomical level fairly easily. We can associate the seed with our reproductive organs at the bottom of our spine, the roots with the bottom of our back, the trunk with our core, and the leaves, fruit and flowers with the top of our selves.

But the mapping, at least holding to some criteria for distinguishing one energy center from the next, requires an adjustment or two to cohere. The following represents a best estimate of how I would frame these centers against the concepts explored with the symbols of the constituent parts of the tree and the concepts to follow as we look at the stages across several frameworks or systems.

The Root

In the accepted seven Chakra interpretation, which is more or less familiar in the West*, the first Chakra is always called the Root. Seed and Root in this interpretation are intertwined: the initiation point.

This is the sense of connection to primal self, to the first understanding of self as one enters the world, which I interpret as essentially the energy associated with the attachment response of a totally vulnerable newborn: “Please save me from the terror of the world; surround me with unconditional love!” The tightening of your pelvic floor that you have with a fear response – your clinching of the pubococcygeus muscles – is precisely where this energy resides.

In many interpretations, this energy center relates to our sense of tribal awareness or clan identity. But as I presented with the tree, I want to suggest the early developmental issues of birth and the stage of varying dependency of the parents – the more deeply Freudian parts of our psychologies.

The narrative concept I want to establish is that at initiation, at birth, we belong not to ourselves but more to our most immediate community. We are members of a core family: our parents, our extended family, our clan. Our stories are inherently communal in that as human infants, we are totally vulnerable and require complete support and attachment to survive. Our loyalty to that community is made profound precisely because of that survival or vulnerability context; any disruption in that relationship – either a failure to bond with or be nurtured by the family or clan, or a later disloyalty or transgression (or simply escape) from that core clan identity – leads to a holding of unhealthy energy. This could be expressed as mental health issues such as depression, obsession or compulsion, substance abuse and alcoholism, as well as issues with the legs, feet, knees, the substructure, and the immune system.

I come from a family that had great schism with the core family: both my parents moved away from their family areas; both cut ties with parents and siblings; both, while called to productive lives of service, suffered from addiction and depression. My own call to personal narrative has much to do with the idea that I also never felt rooted or felt attached to extended family. And my own health issues are not far from this energy center.

The work of the Center for Digital Storytelling has increasingly become associated with the collapse of the Root narrative via our efforts in Silence Speaks with survivors of domestic violence, youth in foster care, and people who have experienced family dysfunction at the public health level. Obviously if one has a story that is associated with trauma in the core family or clan such as child abuse, abandonment, or a toxic relationship of some kind, then finding a story to bring what is often associated in a person with shame or profound inadequacy out to be viewed by everyone, can be life transforming.

The Sacrum

At a second level, the Sacrum Chakra is associated with reproduction, but also with the general idea of core relationships outside the nurturing first family: one's life partner and own home, one's sense of friendship and relationship to others – our emotional landscape. And so the Chakra is related in some degree to control of one's life decisions, control of one's sexuality, control of the home, and control of one's work and financial security.

As we reach an age of beginning to differentiate from our parents – I see it in my ten year old daughter now – there is a growing awareness of a new potential for independence and an energy to set the conditions of one's life, to control one's destiny. At this age, we hold all that potential in our bodies, and in many ways

this is a sacred hope, a sacred faith. But as we get older, we face the hard road of reality. The issues of our control are wrapped up in the vast complexity of social interactions, and the space we imagined – a space of happy, healthy bonded love relationships, fruitful work and social interactions, successful negotiation of ways to sustain and support ourselves, the romantic ideal – often turns out less than expected. The intuitive healers like Myss suggest the development of issues associated with back and hip chronic pain, and possibly with sexual dysfunction and/or diseases of the reproduction organs, are related to the relationship in our bodies with the unfolding experience of this part of our stories.

As has been often said, you can see in the character of person at this age, much of who they will become: how driven they are, how much they need to feel satisfied, how much they feel they lack, where they fit in a pecking order of social relationships, what their partnership relationship choices might be, etc. So it seems hardly surprising that the stories with which we associate at these ages become lifelong maps of our expectations and that we hold them inside the parts of our body where we begin to prepare for adolescence. And it seems from our Latin root for this region – the sacrum – that we have for millennia held the area where the womb and our organs are supported as something deeply sacred, something to return to in our deepest consciousness.

Soul Chakra (Solar Plexus)

We are defined by our tribe, we are defined by our first engagement in relations in our world, then we are also defined to ourselves, for our selves. In the anatomical narrative developing here, this third energy center is about how we come to define ourselves as unique individuals and how we hold our sense of self, of positive esteem.

“Having the guts” is an expression I grew up with. It was used to represent courage, but also tenacity, depth of conviction, indefatigable energy, total resolve. To “feel it in your guts” also meant a deeper sense of impact on your emotions, or your core being; it makes you sick to your stomach.

These phrases being mapped to adolescence are all about the characteristics we are encouraged to hold in highest value: self-discipline, self-control, self-confidence; but also hold all our greatest fears: being inadequate, being out-of-control, being betrayed or betraying a trust ourselves, being criticized or to appear weak.

The battlefield of adolescence leaves no one undamaged. We pack many things into our stomachs; our very relationship to food and health is defined here, which in turn becomes the entire range of concerns about appearance and desirability. And our stomachs flatten out sometimes as we find

a nice balanced passage through this period, but many, in our desperate attempts to keep control of our identities, suffer the myriad of eating disorders associated with adolescence, either fiercely working to control a waistline to sustain a positive image for ourselves, or letting go and hiding behind our stomachs and building a wall against the world.

I have also come to associate this part of my body with depth and soulfulness. What adolescence, in the developmental sense, does to our stomachs – pushing us up and away from our bellies – is precisely where we need to return. The abdomen is also where each and every breath originates and also terminates, and this sense of making space for ourselves in our abdomen, with every intake, and sinking into our selves with every exhalation.

Heart Chakra

I worry about heart disease. My father died at sixty-one of heart failure, my brother at forty-five. That the heart can hold an array of our losses is unquestionable. It can be slowly strangled by the lack of energetic release that holding onto the losses can encourage. It can be frozen in grief. I am very aware that love can kill – or perhaps the lack of love, the lack of connection that we associate with love. We need connection to survive.

In the Hindu tradition, this energy center relates less to romance and more to compassion. The understanding which comes with the engagement one has with the world leads to a compassionate mindset – or, I should say, if one has had the fortune of emerging into the world with strong bonds to clan and family, a healthy approach to one's initial interpersonal relationships, and a healthy ego that survives adolescence. If one has been not so fortunate, then a compassionate perspective is blocked, as is the energy that keeps the heart muscle thriving. The story you tell is not that it is possible to take the love you experienced and expand it to everyone in a universal embrace, it is instead that only by protecting your feelings – your heart – will you feel safe in the world. The irony is that the stasis of this attitude is the perfect recipe for circulatory distress and a vicious cycle driven by fear of rejection.

I would venture to guess that most stories start here, or, put another way, the fountainhead for story is in the heart. Stories start deep within all of our experience, but they become something different when we can see ourselves as part of a greater whole. Because we know ourselves, emerging from adolescence, as belonging to a species, as being part of a bigger picture, and because when we reflect on experience as we enter young adulthood and through the remainder of our lives, we know we are not just revealing a part of ourselves, we are calling the stories

to the human experience. We are connecting to all humanity, and – through the elaboration of our lived stories, from a psychological perspective, into fable, myth, fiction, and our best attempt at the reduction called non-fiction from memory and reflection on the memories of others – we are making ourselves part of the greater whole.

That sense of encompassing connection, of compassion, becomes the way storywork functions as a complex form of renewal for both teller and listener. As we tell, we work out that which is uncertain. We are trying to loosen the layers of awareness, touching bases at the various centers of our knowing, perhaps aligned with the energy centers in our bodies, perhaps lapses of memory, the occlusions that are part of our survival mechanisms, calling us to form an explication of our own realities. The forms – spoken, written, sung, interpreted in image or in sound – whether performed as short recitations, as elaborate accounts of many segments, or as grand sagas, all accomplish one thing: they present a piece of our knowing to others and conjoin us with the river of all other stories in the collective awareness of the human species.

And as listeners, we lose ourselves in the story, knowing that we are conjoined with the author; we are listening to ourselves as we hear what is completely familiar and shared, but with what also seems different and surprising. And as all of us know in doing group process, each story builds upon the other and each heart becomes both more available and stronger as our stories and the stories we are hearing become interwoven.

Throat Chakra

If the source of our connection to others allows us to find words, images, ideas that become our stories, then our voice – the part of our body associated with the sounds we make as animals – allows us to present our stories. We find our creative voice through processes of initiation, training, and mastery. This part of our energy, the bubbling up of the muse that forms concepts into art and ideas into words, rests on all the other Chakras. The coherence of our voicing of story may not have yet arrived – the work our head must do in sculpting our initial expressions – but we feel the necessity to create, to speak for our tribe, for our loved ones, for our selves, give voice to what we feel and be connected through a listener, real or imagined.

In our story circles, we experience shyness, the lack of voice, as a holding back. We assume that the simple desire to share experience is universal. But in fairness, many people carry, from cultural tradition or personal experience, a restraint to speaking out. They do not feel that their voice is privileged to speak, and their humility need not be a repressed sense of silencing. Where and when they speak, and to whom

they would give their trust and confidence, are deeply personal questions for all individuals.

That they have a right to speak, to witness, to address inequity and injustice, to be valued as citizens with the extant democratic and human rights of all individuals, is still the planetary project. Many countries do have laws repressing expression; many have cultural taboos based on race, gender, sexuality and social circumstance influencing who has the right to voice their concerns and express themselves as creative individuals. Liberating the throat Chakra is still considered subversive by many, and there a thousand ways that we are asked to hold back our creativity, our expressive self.

It is not surprising that silencing leads to constriction of voice, diseases related to hypertension, throat cancer, and the proverbial pain in the neck and damage to the seven vertebrae below our skull. In theater, we learn very early that most of us have a muscle tightening in our throats that occurs when we are performing, speaking in public, even with friends and family, or sitting by ourselves and speaking out loud. The prolonged control of those muscles becomes thoroughly conditioned and you sometimes hear it as the voice strains to be heard in sharing difficult information. We have also seen, countless times, people feeling the emotion rise up to the point where their vocal chords cease to function. The words are stuck and they cannot pass the constricting upper chest.

As with all the Chakras, deficiencies are only half the story of the potential for dysfunction. There can be excessive over-development of a Chakra: an athlete's legs and hips as they move beyond the capacity of the body to withstand; the over-developed sense of libido or emotion causing issues with boundaries and relationship problems; the overstated ego creating an equal number of stomach disorders as in people with low self esteem; the heartfelt giver who ends up carrying the weight of so many that their own heart fails.

My own mother, born with an enormous sense of self confidence and a desire to be heard, spoke with great force as a political activist all her life. Her phone voice was legendary, loud, and clear, and it was difficult to deny any request or to stop her amid her retelling of a dramatic campaign or confrontation with authority. But in her mid-fifties, she developed a condition called spastic dysphronia that effectively made it near impossible for her to speak and be understood. This is a condition officially not related to stressing of the vocal chords, but it was difficult to believe that there was not a relationship between the way she used her voice for decades, struggling against the dominant Southern culture's absolute disdain for her perspective and also against the sexism of her fellow

male travelers in the social justice movement. Her voice may have sought to move mountains, but it was all but taken from her for many years.

Storytelling and voice were very central to our approach at the Center for Digital Storytelling; we realized that the process of self-recording a considered narrative was a breakthrough for many people. Just that act of getting words out and being able to hear oneself (even if you didn't like the sound of your voice) seemed to make a huge difference in people's appreciation of their talents as writers and the power of their messages.

Head Chakra

While the head is assumed to be the center of consciousness, we have seen how consciousness is informed by all parts of our body and the stories our bodies tell. When we reach the level of our head (in this tradition, the energy wheel hovers in the space right behind our eyes), we have come to the place of envisioning, of clear-sightedness, of deep listening, of the taking in of all the rich fragrances of life. In fact, all the embodied metaphors that relate to the three sensory apparati that are in and around this wheel – our ears, eyes, and nose – have to do with a sense of deeper knowing. To see someone's point, to hear what you are saying, to smell a rat; all of these sayings are about the critical interrelationship between the machinery of sensation in our heads and our thinking processes.

From an evolutionary standpoint, it makes sense to keep the perceptually critical tools of sight, sound and smell close to the main circuit board of our brains. This triad of sensual awareness that allows us to function in the world matures quickly in our newly born bodies; these faculties are prepared to assist us in identifying what we need and what we want to avoid, almost immediately.

To paraphrase Moshe Feldenkrais: a great deal of our tonality – the way our body works as a system (or not) – has to do with lugging around the perceptual vessel of our heads. Our ears hear something and we turn to balance the sound between both ears, we look with our eyes focusing, our noses twitch, and the rest of our body goes on alert, with our necks turning our shoulders, our hips, the entire apparatus shifting to allow the head to focus. These are not usually conscious parts of our experience as an aware cognitive event, but this thinking, embodied reaction to stimulus takes place completely inside our brains and neurons all around our heads are firing. And we do think about this kind of thinking a great deal; we wonder how much we are led by intuitive primal behavior – flight or fight – versus rational decision making. And all our lives, our heads are helping us

sort out the balance between subconscious and conscious thought.

As this relates to life stage, the thinking process about consciousness has happened at all these levels of the body at all the life stages – from our first mapping of sensation into behavior, to our self-delineation from the world and other people as a child, into a moral or ethical perspective about cause and effect as a pre-teen, into a sense of wholeness and purpose as a teen, into a deeper compassion as a young adult, with a voice to speak the truths our knowledge and experience give us as a mature adult. All of this is thinking, obviously, involving our mind in relationship to the emotional landscape in our bodies. Each one of these processes moves us toward greater complexity in our awareness.

As we age, we seek more than knowing, more than knowledge; we seek wisdom. For me, wisdom is fully integrated understanding that can be used to restore equilibrium in complex systems, like our lives. It is one thing to solve problems that are in front of us, to see how shifting one lever, taking one pill, can lead to the desired effect. It is another to have a deeper perspective that attaching to one solution, even one prescribed by authority, or considered the best possible option, has unseen effects. Our mature minds allow us to think through, to consider the complexity, and to choose a path or paths that hold all the issues in consideration.

It is also true that this kind of thinking leads us toward detachment. We make our best choices when we sink below the rational, become aware of our psychological and emotional entanglements, and detach ourselves, stand back from a distance, and look at our character in the drama, and then allow the sweet mix of intuitive and conscious voices to lead us forward.

Back in Texas, it is what we called getting "philosophical." That is, this kind of detached wisdom gives us the tool set to face the diminishing of our vital energy, to face endings, to face death. And, of course, this is just-in-time awareness.

The Crown Chakra

As I travel into the other chapters in this book, it will become clear that in spiritual matters I am an endless skeptic. I do not question the technology of spiritual practices. They work. They give people purpose, peace and esoteric joy. To question someone's faith is just poor taste. As long as it serves them, and it imposes little on others (other than perhaps by good example), spirituality is a deeply human process I support. Given the enormously inadequate toolset that we are given (by God?) to cope with existence, finding a way to surrender to all-ness,

to interconnectedness, to that which binds all in an unknowable form or in the form of an old Semitic sheepherder grandfather type – why wouldn't we want that succor? – it all sounds very tempting.

But it is perhaps because of religion, that practice of tribal consensus and delineation, that I generally have felt that attachment to spiritual clarity, particularly as it assumes the form of a guru and their devotee in any formal context, is a one way ticket to, uh, hell. Religion is not spirituality, of course. The post-sixties spiritual pluralism changed everything; suddenly all bets were off, West could embrace East, the pattern within the pattern was explored, and even old atheists like me could talk about their work in spiritual languages and not feel too embarrassed or even out of place. Side by side with the great Plural has of course been a deep regression into fundamental belief systems, but I don't think this genie goes back in the bottle. Religion has changed and spiritual practices in the 21st Century will combine all available technologies of mindfulness, from mesmerizing metaphorical mysticism, to energetic enrapturing embodiment, to singular or dozens of dancing deities who serve as most appropriate metaphors for our life process issues, or perhaps to the Super-ego like Abrahamic Daddy God and tortured son and prophets who stand in so well for our lived miseries. We are integrators, we are restorers, and we wouldn't mind being transcendently aware.

Which brings us to the Crown. Have you had a transcendent experience? I have. And I always describe them the same way. It is as if someone lifted the top of my head and there was a whoosh as whatever I felt or thought exploded out, and whatever I thought was out there, came simultaneously rushing in.

As I say, the skeptic in me assumes that in fact the biochemistry of this has much to do with endorphins and dopamine jolts. Some event or confluence of events catches the little corner of my brain, called my conscious mind, unprepared. But I am more than happy to call these experiences transcendent.

More to the point, the part of me that knows for certain I will have a final big transcendence – the end of my corporeal existence – is fairly certain that there will be a pretty big rush then as well. And all of my work, all of my preparation, all of the ways I have come to perspective about body, about emotion, about forgiveness, about love, about cleaning up the messes I have created for myself and others, all the stories I have ever heard or told, all of this effort really is to provide me with a glorious journey out of my body. No resistance, just a smile and a farewell.

And because we know that at some point we will be getting that ticket and boarding the boat to cross over to the next place, this part of our bodies, this signifier with the heavenly all encompassing, is never far from our attention. It is touched with every single story we

hear where death is present…which is the vast, vast majority of stories that matter to us in all our various literatures. It is present every time we say goodbye… knowing that someone we know may not return. It is present with the simplest thing, the rising and setting of the sun and the moon. It is here right now as you are reading these words, inside of you, as a friend, a lover, a deep, deep connection to nature, as all that is, and all that can be, and most certainly should be, loved.

And so, whether it is called out by reading words that strike a tone of connection and fire off a dopamine jolt that feels like a wonderful true kiss with the profound, or because God is here, right now, smiling at you, with her angels and cherubs, how you experience the transcendent doesn't really matter.

In the top of your head you have a door to eternity, and you might as well use it.

Love Letter

Stina French

Play Movie

Stina's story is first as an observer of a process. We get to join her as an archaeologist of memory, looking for clues about how someone turned out a certain way. As a child she watched her mother's physical transformations. As an adult she re-considers the meaning of those changes. She also observed an alienation from body, in a lack of hugs, in perhaps a sense of defeat in the face of the challenge of disease.

Her assessments are understated. Was her mother making poor choices? Or was she simply unfortunate? We have hints at each. But the makes clear how her decline and attitude was observed as troubling to her as a child, and is something Stina hopes to avoid as an adult.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *We could project on a story like this an archetype a solar plexus story, about someone with a frozen part of their ability to express self-love? But one could also say this is about other parts of the body symbols, the heart, the sacrum, the throat, etc . Were this the story of your mother, where might you imagine holding the feelings of loss or grieving?*

2. *We tell stories about others, in this case another's approach to physical health, as part of owning some degree of insight about our own issues and approaches to health. Stina mentions her running, and her hugging her children. What awareness does this story bring about the way we measure our own struggle to be healthy against our awareness of the struggle of others?*

3. *The mention of her sister's struggles and the dedication at the end, "To Southern Sisters…" suggests there is a broad cultural component to these issues, women who have a particular difficulty living as healthy as they might. What way does culture affect our relationship to our body's story?*

Questions

1. The chapter proposes that what happens to us in our lives is carried in our bodies in ways that can portend discomfort at least and chronic illness at worst. What are your thoughts about the relationship between life experience and health?

2. Another important distinction the chapter makes is that we have the power to take a trauma, difficulty, or feeling of inadequacy that may be diminishing our health, and by narrating the experience or feeling to others, we are releasing part of that energy that contributes to ill health and making ourselves healthier. What are your thoughts about the power of mind over body in general, and the specific idea that sharing stories assists in physical recovery and healing?

3. Each Chakra was discussed as relating to a life stage. As you read through the material, was there a particular relationship between a story of your life experience and a part of your body that remembers the story? Did they map to the suggested relationships? (i.e. root – early childhood – attachment; sacrum – middle childhood – sexuality; solar plexus – adolescence – identity; heart – young adult – relationship or service; throat – middle adult – leadership or visibility; head – later adult – vision or awareness; crown – elder – spirituality.) Or were there other relationships between an event and a place where you hold the energy of the event in your body?

Prompt 1 – Body's Lessons

Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners.

William Shakespeare

We all have stories about the surprises of our bodies, tests where our body has somehow survived…times when our bodies disappointed.

Endurance, frailty, strength, limits, beauty, shame – these are all words we associate with stories we tell about our bodies. Share a moment when your body taught you a lesson.

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Prompt 2 – Scar Stories

If experience is not coming from the body, it is not known.

Marion Woodman

All of us have scars – small ones from the scrapes along the road, large ones from the major bumps and spills. Some we can wear as badges of survival, some are not visible and are beneath our skin, beneath the surface, but have left their mark all the same. Share a story about a scar.

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Prompt 3 – Body as Metaphor

"By the sweat of your brow," "to provide lip service," "take it on the chin,"

"A pain in the neck," "shoulder a burden," "doesn't know his ass from his

elbow," "wear your heart on your sleeve," "stomach the problem," "can't

find your ass with both hands," "pull your leg," "get a foot in the door"

A story is embodied is when you think of a story in the context of an appropriate body metaphor. Choose an appropriate body metaphor to explore the first or last line of a reflection on a given life experience.

If you need an additional list, look here:

http://www.wordnik.com/lists/public-list-body-metaphors

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CHAPTER THREE

The Seven Stages of Our Lives

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. As, first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

William Shakespeare, As You Like It

I am sitting next to my daughter. She is reading to herself. Reading is a challenge; there are a few issues. Tonight she was also sad about school, about a timed assignment that overwhelmed her in class – she did not finish in time – and she felt ashamed of not being as good as others. She carried these feelings like a lead weight after dinner. Tears were shed as she worked through her homework. While I encouraged her not to fully dramatize the pain, to remember, it was only homework, I also said I understand, it sucks to be different. To feel less than.

I thought, as parents do, of the pathology of her struggles. Of the etching of a hundred little setbacks into a rut, into a pattern, a story she tells herself.

There is no assumption in this writing that you are familiar with any topics discussed. If I have done my job, I will be introducing concepts that are presented straightforwardly enough that you will not lose your way on the path of this book.

In this chapter I turn to human life stages and development. This means a quick and dirty reduction of some psychological theories below. These theories help shape my thoughts on why certain stories serve life stages in certain ways. As Shakespeare suggests, we are all aware of the pattern of life lived, and the expectations of each stage, without having an expert describe them to us.

As was mentioned in the preceding chapters, a larger sense of biological process and our bodies' own stories takes us on a journey that mirrors what we experience in working through each life stage. The stories that emerge at each stage of life may have a particularly profound impact upon us. But this does not mean that the approach we take to the stories of these experiences are universal. Two people experiencing similar flourishing joy or awful trauma at a given stage may hold very different perspectives about their stories; the patterns that become fixed in our behavior or the insights that come later will span a great spectrum of possibility. As we respond and shape our narrative, there is a complex interweaving of the overall context of given events, our own temperament and resiliency, and the cultural ways "our people" respond to various experience.

There are also no universals in life stage definition. And I am beginning to expect there is also not a genuine consensus about why we want to demarcate emergent difference in people, since the diagnosis of developmental delay too often becomes a self-fulfilling pathology. As was the case with my daughter, the more she is told she is behind in reading, undoubtedly some part of her identity is shaped as a "poor" learner, not just a poor reader, when of course she may be capable of more "advanced" cognitive skills in another arena of knowing. These markers become borders to cross, and one's hesitance, or failure, is assessed as a story of shame and deficiency.

At the same time, marking our progress – as innocents entrusted to care and as exploring youngsters; as self-aware members of a family and community; as young psycho-sexual beings becoming ourselves; as young adults fully in the dance of mating, parenting and choosing occupations; as productive adults and self-determined members of society; as authorities and leaders in our extended families, communities and workplaces; and as wizened and graceful elders – is useful. Although we can and should maintain compassion for every individual's journey, we inescapably live in a world of social expectations. We judge ourselves against those expectations and celebrate successful passage in our most time-honored rituals – even as we learn to make peace with shame, deficiency, or loss if our passages do not follow the path expected of us.

Grand Canyon

Daniel Weinshenker

Play Movie

As Daniel prepares for fatherhood, he reflects on a final family trip before his parents separated. As an adult, he can imagine the sub-text of his parents experience as compared to the experience of his he and his sibling. His story processes the loss, the suffering and search for comfort in the voice of late night talk radio. But in this snapshot of his new perspective as a young adult, he can find comfort and a sense of tenderness in the heartbeat of his child in utero.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. The Kegan model described in this chapter provides a concept for thinking about how important it is to take perspective on life. Stories do not always present "aha" moments, but they show us a flicker of new understanding and the possibility of grace. Does this story provide you with a feeling of a new perspective that is emerging for the author?

2. A childhood experience of difficulty maps itself on the responsibility of a new parent, what ways do you feel any given version of a story allows an author to continually re-consider meaning from an single event, in this case a specific family vacation?

3. Who do you feel this story is for?

The Life Stage Paradigm

The following graphic suggests several things.

First, it suggests that I like making charts like this to try to wrap my head around the comparative evolution of the science of developmental psychology. Were you a student of the field, this certainly would be helpful to keep the ideas straight and to roughly place them where they figure in a total life span.

If you are not a first year psychology student, what can you take from this? First, a sense of how these ideas evolved. Historically, Freud's childhood development theories came first, but they more or less suggested that once you passed through puberty, you were pretty much cooked (as in well done or toast). So it was left to his Danish student Eric Erikson (and his wife Joan Serson Erikson) to expand upon the theories of development over a lifetime.

LIFE STAGES COMPARED	Freud	Piaget	Maslow	Kohlberg	Erikson	Kegan	Life Events
Frail Elder					Wisdom *Integrity vs Despair*		Assisted Life Facing Death
Elder							Retirement
Middle Adult				Universal Ethics	Care *Generativity vs Stagnation*	Interindividual	Career/ Service
Young Adult		Higher Mind *Vision/Logic*	Self-actualization	Social Contact/ Individual Rights	Love *Intimacy vs Isolation*	Institutional	Family
Post-Adolescence			Esteem	Law and Order Social Order			College
Adolescence	Genital	Formal Operational	Love and Belonging	Social Conformity Interpersonal	Fidelity *Identity vs Role Confusion*	Interpersonal	Middle & High School
Childhood	Latency Phallic	Concrete Operational	Safety	Individualism and Exchange	Competence Purpose	Imperial	Primary School
Birth	Anal Oral	Pre-Operational Sensorimotor	Physiological	Obedience vs Punishment	Will Hope	Impulsive Incorporative	Pre-School

I added Piaget, Maslow, and Kohlberg because, first, in a historic sense, they were informing discussion about life stage and personal development in different ways in psychology and other fields, and, second, they demonstrate other ways of connecting to evolving awareness, although they focus on cognition and learning (Piaget), needs (Maslow), and morals (Kohlberg) as the lenses.

This book does not have time to break down each of these theories. If you are curious about these various theories, you are welcome to explore them in more detail through the bibliography and accompanying links, but for this discussion, we will assume you are only curious about how this might help you with your own stories. Can the mapping of these various patterns of life stage description serve us as storytellers?

As suggested in the introduction, I have been most attracted to the relatively newer theory of Robert Kegan. Returning to Kegan, as someone who was extremely well versed in these other models, I think we can find the usefulness of these comparisons for the way we think of our stories.

Kegan posits from both Freud and Erikson, and more directly from Piaget, the idea that our evolving self requires the mastery of one stage in order to advance successfully to the next step up the ladder. Implicit in this perspective is that any story of difficulty passing through a stage, any obvious developmental disruption or evidence of developmental delay, explains a bit why further mastery of later stages might prove difficult, and provide us as storytellers and reflective writers with material that serves us with our present life dilemmas.

Interpreted from David Bakan's The Duality of Human Existence: Isolation and Communion (1966) and Robert Kegan's The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development

Kegan's reference is the idea that we are all subject to a current worldview at a given stage for which we are more or less unaware. A baby can not distinguish between her inner cognitive life and the world; everything just is. But at some point, the baby begins to see the world, and particularly those wonderful people who seem to respond to the baby with such attention, as being different, apart. The baby becomes a separate person to himself, and can now look upon the stage of seeing himself as purely integrated into the world as an object to be understood, both for himself, and in the interactions of other objects, people, or things with the world. If there is a story in our childhood where we do not have the opportunity to "separate" the subject phase of our "incorporated self" as we attempt to become impulsively exploring the objects of separateness at the next phase, then, argues Kegan, we can become stuck and limited in our evolution as increasingly complex individuals. And in describing his work with children who for reasons of external trauma experience internal cognitive or emotional delay, he shows that if they do not pass successfully through this initial stage, they simply may not be able to interact successfully in the world.

Taking this concept forward, then, at each of these developmental stages we have an opportunity to turn a corner on our worldview and make object out of an understanding of ourselves of which we were once subject. The endless evolution of perspective becomes a way to review our lives and to assess, through whichever developmental framework we would like to explore, the facets of our successful passage from one stage to the next.

Kegan understands that these are not perfect boxes of development. Our lives all have spectrums of developmental success, and sometimes slower or more rapid evolutions from a given stage to another. Re-locating the narratives about our struggle to gain perspective at a given stage, and working toward an appropriate current insight that re-frames the story of those periods, is the essential work of our life process.

A Case In Point

Two a.m. A cold February morning. And I mean cold. This was the last night of a stint in Fort McMurray, Eastern Alberta, 35° below Celsius or Fahrenheit doesn't matter. Outside it was freezing. Inside it was cosy. I should have slept through the night, tired as I usually am after one of our workshops.

Instead, I woke up with a start.

That itself wasn't that surprising. Exit mornings I dream about missing planes because the alarm doesn't go off, or I am fretting about the work I will return to back at the office. So not that unusual.

What happened next was this: I picked up a computer, and the first thing I did was Google Attachment Theory. Don't even remember what provoked me, it was just a thought. I had not been thinking about this concept. At all. But my work for the prior month was dropping me deeper and deeper into myself, into the shadows under the shadows at the lowest catacombs of my emotional fears, self-doubt, and anger.

So I read. And I thought. An hour passed. And slowly I had this sort of sickening feeling of recognition with some aspects of the characteristics described.

I composed a long letter to my surviving family member, my older brother David. He was eighteen when I was born. I suggested that perhaps my clingy childhood traumas might have had something to do with my mother's MissingInAction attitude in the infant care department. He said, "Yeh, of course, of course that makes sense."

Two weeks later we spent a week together, for the first time in our lives, telling stories about our parents, their lives, their choices, and what it might have to do with some remaining riddles about ourselves, and our approaches to relationships.

It was good.

This example suggests that we while we might all be working to push ourselves from our current stage of development to a new perspective, at all times we have endless new perspectives to put on the earlier stages of our lives.

On the opposing page, we take the Erikson stages, more completely defined, and suggest how stories could emerge from a consideration of each stage.

ERIKSON'S STAGES	BASIC CONFLICT	IMPORTANT EVENTS	OUTCOME	POSSIBLE STORIES
Hope Infancy (birth to 18 months)	Trust vs. Mistrust	Feeding	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.	What stories are told about your coming into the world, first actions, first steps, first words, first connections to parents, grandparents, siblings, etc.? Share one.
Will Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Toilet Training	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.	What are the stories you tell about your sense of adventure and independence? How do you earliest memories suggest a story about the person you would become?
Purpose Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Exploration	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.	We all have stories of finding the balance between assertiveness and shyness. We can find the roots of our sense of agency in early stories of how the world reacted to our demands for visibility. What's yours?
Confidence School Age (6 to 11 years)	Industry vs. Inferiority	School	Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.	Alfred Adler felt that the voice in our heads is often a sense of lacking. Our stories can be filled with amazing accomplishments, but we hear our defeats louder. Tell a story about feeling your power.
Fidelity Adolescence (12 to 18 years)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Social Relationships	Teens needs to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.	What part of you do you fully accept? What part of you feels like it wants to be accepted? In all of our lives, we have stories of self-discovery that show us a flourishing self. Share your story of when you liked the person you are.

ERIKSON'S STAGES	BASIC CONFLICT	IMPORTANT EVENTS	OUTCOME	POSSIBLE STORIES
Love Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Relationships	Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.	The narrative of being loved, of having your soul accepted, defines much of our lives. We are never beyond the self that carries the miracle of acceptance, and the wound of rejection. Share a lesson in love story.
Care Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years)	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Work and Parenthood	Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.	We also sit in balance between rearranging our world and our world re-arranging us. Maybe responsibility means rewarding lives, or maybe retreat becomes more realistic. Share a story of being in the driver's seat of your life. What have you learned from the curves, bumps, and finish lines?
Wisdom Maturity (65 years to death)	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Reflection on Life	Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfilment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.	You may not be long lived to have pulled deep lessons from life's journey. Insights that transcend may be few, but the circumstances that provoked those insights are always valued stories. Tell your transendence tale.

In suggesting that life stages mirror a tree, or even the body, one strong image is vertical ascent: we grow up, we move from low to high, from small to large. This also suggests that our stories become somehow built upon each stage of our past; our story can be constructed in a way so that we can understand the story of the entity, ourselves for example, as a hierarchy. We evolve as parts built upon parts. A central idea of developmental psychology is that, in part, the younger self defines the older self, at least the shadow of the younger self, right down to genetic material, early childhood, and the relative stability of post-adolescent identity. In research, the examination of a part – for example, the narratives of relative success in passing through a given developmental stage as a child – gets interpreted as a defining factor of later strengths or challenges.

The System Of Wholeness In Our Stories

Scientific method likes neat boxes, but of course we know that complex systems, like a single human organism living in the real world, are not that simple. Frankly, neither is a single celled protoplasm floating in the sea. So rather than suggest a fluid dynamic within an ascending system like a tree, or the ascent from baby to adult, it might be better to suggest concentric circles, weaving back into each other like a endlessly flowing Celtic knot, where the center has a thread of the outer ring of development, even as that outer ring feeds back into the center.

This also suggests that our stories work in a similar fashion; the snapshot of a given considered reflection feeds back into the understanding of not only who we have been, but also who we are now in telling the story, and who we will become. And any reflection on any stage in our development becomes a re-arranging of the possible meanings of that stage on our current story.

This type of holistic thinking proposes that at whatever point we treat telling stories as a form of insight work, of deep meditation and reflection, we are also on a journey that just might turn our world upside down, either by re-establishing balance to the entire system of our lives or by throwing an unexpected monkey wrench in the system. We are always at risk, in re-considering stories of our lives, of a small detour to some unexamined part of our lived experience, which can surprise us with it's power to emotionally overwhelm us.

The Mirror of Early Childhood, Emergence to Adolescence and Full Life Development

One of my pet theories is that the seven stages have three repetitions, from 0-2 years, from 2 years to late adolescence, from late adolescence to death. In some ways this allows us to see three identity cycles, three circles from emergence to challenge to transformation.

The first cycle is the fall from grace that happens in all tiny iterations of separation from the mother or caregiver. One could say that the evolution of awareness that allows that first NO! to be uttered is as dramatic as the rest of our lives. And one could also say that each tiny part of that process – the dissent from rooted grace of first emergence to the soul test of becoming an observer, to voicing oneself in the world – has as dramatic an impact on our long term identity as what comes after that stage.

Early childhood theorists are more and more aware of the crèche period as forming patterns that make us hard-wired for a number of the ways we will end up responding to the world. This of course leads to the "precious" parenting era of my generation of parents, where we both try all we can to make the early childhood near perfect and blame ourselves for every little failure in our parenting process in early childhood. For me, the truth is that all babies, like adolescents and fully lived adults, each enter their own separate wilderness and come out the other side as new beings. The parents can of course provide stability, but even the most aware of parents mainly watch and wonder.

But thinking about the stories of early childhood presents a problem for us as storytellers. We might have heard stories of our early childhood years, but we can rarely remember them with anything approaching specifics. Most of us are not able to access these stories without years of therapeutic work, if at all. So if our "fate" is formed before we can remember, is the rest of our memory work really worth so much effort? The field of attachment theory builds off of this paradox. Because possible ruptures in our successful maternal or parental bonding play out in lifelong unconscious behaviors, we must invest in the uncovering of those memories in order to move toward wholeness.

My perspective is that because the events of adolescence and our adult lives provide us with behavioral patterns we can assess in memory work, we can use those stories to understand earlier patterns; even if they are not fully cooked memories, we are aware the shadow of early trauma is cast on our later life.

What is consistent in development psychology is that our journey into adolescence is a “hero’s journey” in every sense. We go through a complete evolutionary process from a natural present being, to an ever more self-conscious being as a result of the wounds of separation, to a psychic death of adolescent separation, to a character taking the bane of our journey into the underworld of teenage fear and loathing back to the larger world in the hero’s return as a young adult. Very few of us would disagree that the challenges of coming of age are not some kind of death and transcendence, even at the simplest level of leaving home and becoming an independent individual.

For many years, I linked the Campbellian monomyth to the issue of “natural shamanism” in resilient survivors of significant to severe childhood trauma. Resiliency is a strength to be nurtured and developed by everyone. But there also appear to be a rare few who have a bio-chemistry that allows them, almost regardless of the depth of their loss, to have the hero’s ability to return from the abyss with lessons, with a presence or a talent that expresses the healing transcendent. We tell the myth stories of death and resurrection precisely because they speak to the child facing the impending darkness of growing up, and those stories provide the map to a better, more resilient self.

So we can see the seven stages as a pattern that repeats, a pattern of rootedness, of supported ascendance, of depth and struggle, of re-defined connection, individual voice, of new vision and purpose, and transcendent awareness, again and again, in cycles that build upon earlier cycles.

Ironing

Ryan Trauman

Play Movie

We can find richness in the mundane activities of everyday life. The very repetition of an action, the cleaning of ironing of clothes, the washing of dishes, the taking out the garbage, becomes symbolic of an achieved normality.

Ryan processes significant losses through the prism of this image of his mother's methodical approach to ironing. The image becomes a way to hold the memory of an in tact family, long after the pre-mature losses of both his parents.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. Ryan's story suggests that layers of meaning and perspective can be un-packed through the re-visiting of very specific memories. What ways does the idea of daily ritual suggest the metaphor endearment for you?

2. As we move through life, death of a person with whom you have a primary relationship may play a large or small role in the construction of your identity. How does the tone and distance in Ryan's story make you feel about the lessons he is showing us about resiliency in the face of loss?

3. Where we all find some comfort in remembrance, the construction of a considered text, an artful reflection, deepens some aspect of the relationship to a story. As you listened to Ryan tell about his journey, what ways was the use of language, pace, and image adding to the impact of his insights about his mother's legacy on his life.

Questions

1. *Developmental Psychology has one hundred plus years of complex thinking behind it and informs countless issues in education, mental health care provision, popular cultural ideas about life passages, etc. But many of us do not see life as steps on a ladder. Discuss your thoughts on the relationship between a vertical ascendant model of successful maturation, and other possible ways of understanding how people successfully grow up.*

2. *The idea of having life live you versus you living your life is a popular way of understanding Kegan's borrowed idea from Piaget about being subject to your relationship to the world, as opposed to making your interactions with the world or other people an object over which you feel conscious control. Discuss ways you have felt "in control" and "out-of-control" as you grew up, and how you remember your changing from one feeling to another.*

3. *A cyclical idea of development was presented where old stories get re-defined and re-visited to assist us on another turn of our lives, from greater self-understanding or to greater ability to bond and work with others. In your observation of yourself and others, how has the re-visiting of life events helped us to address the challenges we are currently facing?*

Prompt 1 – Decisive Moments

> *"I write to discover. I write to uncover. I write to meet my ghosts...I write because it is dangerous, a bloody risk, like love, to form the words."*
>
> Terry Tempest Williams

Every one of us has a moment before the big change – a low before the high, a setback before an accomplishment, a loneliness before the connection, a bad day at work before the perfect vacation.

Thinking back on one of the developmental shifts in your life, share a story about a moment of darkness before the light.

Prompt 2 – The Person Inside the Child

There are images we take from childhood, snapshots of ourselves as a fully formed character. Sometimes, even at the smallest age, we knew we were destined to be ourselves.

Share a story of the child you were, and where that child still resides in who you have become.

Prompt 3 – The Sublime

> *"Whereas the beautiful is limited, the sublime is limitless, so that the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt."*
>
> Immanuel Kant

The sublime also happens, if we are lucky, at various points in our life. We find ourselves at the outer edge of our knowing, awake and joyous. For a fleeting second, perhaps, or for a longer period, we feel like we have a touch with grace.

Share your moment of transcendence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Historical Consciousness

History has always called me. I am never without a book about some portion of history nearby. I've never felt like I can quench this particular thirst.

My father had similar penchant. I want to say we share a passion for the "causative." If you keep asking the "why" question about the events of the day, history unfolds itself to you. And if you look to patterns – abstractions on history's narratives – you begin to believe you see the motion of history as an emergent process, orders of complexity building upon each other, from the interactions of each of the 70 billion or so Homo sapiens that have lived and died, so far, and their environments.

The complexity of our interactions with each other and the world forced Homo sapiens to grow brains capable of assisting our evolutionary process from tree bound screeching ape to walking and talking ape. Blessed as our ancestors were as tool makers and wanderers, we ended up living in ever more complex patterns of sustenance and social organization, until at some time, some 70-35,000 years ago, we began to organize our thoughts into reproduced artifacts of memory, pictures and marks as representative meaning, characters as words, and eventually alphabets to construct language. Our stories became histories to be remembered and re-considered.

As such, the evolution of language – the making of different kinds of stories – is one way to look at our cultural evolution as a species. The magical naming of the world created our myths; the organization of words in technologies of reproductions of sounds as alphabets, along with numeracy, gave us a power to systematize our relationship to nature; and building environments dedicated to that systematization gave us our philosophies; and the more recent ability to encompass all or our ways of knowing, our epistemologies as different cultures, gives us a ironic relationship to all knowledge. We can now see our relationship to reality is always clouded by the limitations of our current epochs' observational toolsets and the current evolution and sophistication of our brains and bodies.

So our stories changed, we could organize our stories into a continually evolving consciousness, holding more depth and complexity, perhaps not better than our predecessors situated in oral traditions, but in systems of knowing that allowed us to shape perspectives, to organize the world through the specificity of written language for endless revision, refinement and re-consideration. This ability is what has made our world, for better, and certainly for worse.

Red Moon

Tommy Orange

Play Movie

Tommy Orange is a Cheyenne writer, media artist and public health advocate. In this story, he presents his own growing up, finding love, and the birth of his son through the prism the historical trauma of the Cheyenne people, and the complexity of his own family story. The story presents the Cheyenne naming of his son, by Tommy's father, as a healing of both the historical and family traumas.

Red Moon, the name of an ancestor who was a Cheyenne chief, was passed down seven generations, the duration associated with the responsibility carried by individuals and the community to ancestors past and future, and as a duration capable of healing great historical tragedy.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *When we think about naming processes, the ritual of naming a child, we are immediately aware of the role of language in the construction of a person's identity. What does Tommy's story suggest about the way language, especially metaphor, is important to the way we see ourselves in relationship to the world around us?*

2. *Tommy's story offers his own personal journey from being a child to being a father, as set in the context of loss within his Cheyenne community, in particular a massacre of his tribe in the not distant past. How does reflecting on the history of his community change the way we understand the naming ritual of his son?*

3. *As a writer, Tommy is exploring the subject with a contemporary voice. We recognize his tentativeness, his tenderness, his vulnerability, even as we hear the author's assuredness and self-awareness. Why does this style of writing suggest a recently written story? What does this tell us about the way we process language as belonging to particular historical moments?*

Kieran Egan and a Re-Capitulation Theory of Consciousness

As much as anyone, my inspiration for this book comes from one book. A decade ago I was handed *The Educated Mind*, by a Canadian educational theorist, Kieran Egan. He suggested a framework for re-thinking education based on a very modern spin on the old idea of re-capitulation. The original re-capitulation theory dates back to the mid-nineteenth century in biology; simply put, humans going from the single cells, to egg and sperm, to embryo, etc., demonstrate the evolutionary process in our own physical maturation. We could understand natural selection by studying human biological complexity.

The theory was fairly quickly dismissed as useful in biology, but did have a bit of a run in the early 20th Century as useful for understanding the way we learn. Broad cultural history of how humans learned to understand reality is re-capitulated in the process by which a single individual evolves their cognitive capacities to analyze and communicate more sophisticated understandings of reality.

In education, and as a philosophical perspective, we can easily see that this kind of re-capitulation idea privileges those that think they are at the highest level of evolved intelligence. It suggests earlier ways of knowing – oral societies, newly literate societies, early philosophic and richly academic societies – stack up in an unpleasant hierarchy. The West and its Universities hold the fruits human wisdom as expressed in their large, environmentally disastrous societies, and a New Guinea aboriginal native, obviously a massively complex expert on his or her own ecological context, is essentially impaired by their failure at calculus, quantum theory and comparative literary analysis. One stands above the other as opposed to one can learn from each other. This thinking has historically been expressed as genocidal intolerance for the "primitive" mind.

Fortunately, Egan addresses precisely the "Celtic Knot" of interrelationships between all of the ways of knowing that we have had as a species, and more specifically address the problem with each subsequent accomplishment in complexity in our use of language and resultant cognitive toolsets leading to an attempt by the discoverers to diminish, if not eliminate, earlier ways of knowing. His call is for a re-discovery of all the positive ways that the evolutionary ways of knowing can inform our present world, starting with a re-organization of the way we teach our children.

Egan's approach was aimed a broad human problem: how do we organize education so as not to force the integration of three self-canceling priorities? As he writes:

In the case of the modern school, three distinctive aims have attended its development. It is expected to serve as a significant agency in socializing the young, to teach particular forms of knowledge that will bring about a realistic and rational view of the world, and to help realize the unique potential of each child. These goals are generally taken to be consistent with one another, somewhat overlapping, and mutually supportive… however, each of these aims is incompatible in profound ways with the other two. As with prisons' aims to punish and to rehabilitate, the more we work to achieve one of the schools' aims, the more difficult it becomes to achieve the others.

Kieran Egan. The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding (Kindle Locations 148-152). Kindle Edition.

His argument is provocative. It suggests that the debate about our schools, where the ideal democratic solution is moving toward a compromise victory of competing interests, actually misses the larger point. We do not have to conceive of the three educational ideas as needing either to win out or to integrate; we can challenge and re-think the premises of each in part or entirely and create an alternative educational process based on re-capitulating the evolutionary advancements in human communication and analytical awareness.

So how does this relate to the work of story and the stories we tell ourselves as we walk through our lives? It might not surprise you to learn that Egan is also a dedicated student of the power of storytelling as a learning tool. Another of his books, *Teaching as Storytelling* (1989), provides a framework for K-6 education that is informed by honoring Mythic and Romantic ways of knowing that emerged as we moved from an embodied oral culture to a written culture in alphabetic literacy and numeracy. He sees these ways as built around story in the way we can all imagine the stories of our childhood that matter moving from bedside stories to picture books shared with the child to the heroic narratives of comic books, popular fiction, radio, television and film consumed by and, more importantly, reproduced by the child.

His arguments, as I share, are that the Platonic approach of mastering curricula tend to negate our natural learning and "organic" awareness of wholeness that starts in our sensori-motor earliest childhood. As we learn to detach from what our senses tell us, to greater and greater abstractions of principles that seem, at times, at odds with our perceptual awareness, we become alienated thinking machines, forever dissecting reality, perhaps incapable of sustaining a sense of oneness that exists in our childhood world. Storywork, in education and in life, re-balances the equation, bringing myth and science together, the embodied hero with the natural

learner. And storytelling has always been the best tool for inculcating our social identities, from our root culture's traditions and myths to our larger cultural and spiritual narratives to the popular cultures in live performance, print and electronic mediums, that all of us now consume. Story is the glue between these stages, allowing us to conceive the unity of learning systems in a way that dialogic argument, by itself, can never hope to achieve.

Egan's Five Stages (Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic)

For Egan, we start in the Somatic stage. This is the pre-language world of the infant, most like the sensori-motor stage of Piaget. In this sense, as a mammal, we communicate through our bodies, our movement, our expressions, and we know from childbirth that the world we entered wants us to respond to sound, touch, sight, smell and taste. Egan does not explore this stage in any detail, in part because it is evident that this pre-lingual stage has few stories to tell us.

In my own appropriation of Egan's stages, I also leave this stage as separate (or integrated into this first Mythic stage), but it easily could be a discussion about embodiment in story. Whether we are performing a story as a fully embodied presentation before an audience, or we are listening to or sharing stories across rooms, the body, through gesture and voice, breath and facial expression, often tells us much more than words. We learn to read and communicate these embodied forms of communication long before we make sense of words or speak them ourselves. And unless we have the misfortune of a cognitive limitation that suppresses or prevents our ability to read body language, that knowing never stops growing over our lives.

But for Egan, the work of story begins in the Mythic stage, which he associates with language acquisition. In the historical sense, language was the first magic. By naming the world, we transformed it. It came alive in a transcendent new way through word. And the first words created the first basic form of metaphor, the forms and processes we observed in nature external to our selves, and within our selves, shared endless familiar patterns. Naming the world accentuated those shared patterns, even as they began the process of distinction between humans – with the supernatural ability to categorize reality – and all other species. We became the first god to the world, and that relationship suggested the potential for a super-naming entity, the one that created humans (and everything else).

In naming and connecting, we also remembered and justified and undoubtedly created narrative structures

that reflected the inner states of excitation and release that we experienced as a constant in our relationship to a sometimes friendly, but often hostile, world. And those memories had within them a preternatural relationship, as what might have become a bad storm, a bad day at the hunt, a death of a child or a wife in childbirth, a nice quiet spring day of gathering, a triumphant moment of success in overcoming an enemy; each became something more than the event, and story turned to greater cause and to causation that reflected the supernatural potential of beings past and, perhaps, beings present.

This was also a world of dichotomies, where the understanding of something meant defining what it is not. Good behaviors and bad behaviors; good gods and bad gods; right ways of planting and wrong ways of planting; right ways of pleasing authority and wrong ways of pleasing authority; small societies where the fear of breaking taboo, and insulting not only a human authority, but any number of deistic authorities as well. The mythic world appreciates a specific kind of moral clarity. But it was also a world where the multiplicity of sources of metaphoric power, animistic or polytheistic, meant that tricksters, shape-changers, wizards, and witches could also thrive.

For Egan, this period suggests our personal journeys into language and the specific kind of learning that language allows. Our earliest remembered stories are usually mythic, because a recitation of a family story, or what happened over the weekend, just would hold no fascination to our early minds. Animals that talk – magical creatures like dragons, fairies, giants and ogres, fantasy kingdoms – these are the stories that bridge our whole embodied state of early childhood oneness with the adult world of sense making, of narrative explanations, for the way things are. We can feel these stories as valid exactly because they excite. We are alive in the world, and these mythic stories make all things alive with us, working through our conflicts and problems, helping us to understand ways of coping with difficulty, understanding power and authority, and searching for and finding pleasurable results, in ways that make us feel that our interior world is manageable.

We think of myth as still alive in traditional cultures, and their stories are far from “childhood” tales. Our rooted traditional cultures understood vast and complex processes, organic processes, in great detail, and their cosmologies, by being so deeply steeped in organic metaphor, provide a depth of knowing that remains profoundly powerful, and relevant, to our modern lives. As suggested above, the successive epochs of knowledge production tended not simply to disregard prior knowledge systems as acceptable for consideration, but also to actively erase the existence of those systems (and sometimes the people that were guardians of those

traditions). The Abrahamic myth of the fall of paradise suggests that as we moved to other understandings of the world, as language and new systems of human organization gave us ways to separate ourselves from the natural order, as we gained the acquisition of shaming self-awareness, we lost the wholeness of a natural order. And we perhaps began our illusory belief that humans stand at the center or the natural order, and that therefore nature was to bend at our will: the progress in human consciousness that leads us now to the brink of ecological collapse.

Romantic Stage

But at the point of systems of symbolic organization, this stage in human history did, in fact, progress. We grew human civilizations – civilizations that began to require systems of inter-tribal cooperation or enforced cooperation through conquest. The Romantic period, as Egan calls it, though I find this less than useful as a name; it is perhaps better called the Heroic. This stage, more or less in his educational argument, is concomitant with the Concrete Operational phase of knowing, and reflects, for Egan, the invention of the alphabetic language, of the broad use of writing and numeracy. And just as the kindergärtner, first and second graders take their first steps toward reading and writing, the human race took their first steps toward looking at the world through the system of language.

For Egan, the tale turns toward the Greeks, who, having gained strong knowledge of the alphanumeric systems of the Egyptians, began to scribble down the legends, the histories. Over time, these histories moved from retelling of myths, where man and the supernatural beings frolicked together, to histories where man had to take a long hard look at reality and suggest that the reason a battle was won or lost was not because of pure divine intervention, but by the stupendous effort (or stupendous ineptitude) of mortal men. The stories then took on much of the narrative flourish of myth and pure legend, and laid a layer of perspective – researched and verifiable perspective – over the top of the stories. What interested the Greeks, and most first graders to middle-schoolers, was the Meta Ergon, the superpower energy of a person at the limit of human physical or cognitive accomplishment. The early Greek histories still had heroes that accomplished the impossible, like comic book characters, and their feats inspired awe, similar, but with a bit more observable veracity, than the demi-gods of the Homeric legends.

As we move into this stage of storytelling, we are seeking not just mystical attachment to a natural world filled with seemingly supernatural events, but a way of taking control of a world we are in, making sense of it to our own advantage and mastering at least a shadow of the achievements of the heroes we imagine that “truly” could exist in the world. We

want to compete with the sense of limitation or possibility in our selves and with others. We want to test our limits of doing and knowing, and learn how to reflect on ways to improve – through observation, repetition, and events to test – our abilities. Even as we seek new ideas about reality, our real aim is to control it. Numbers and letters, every day processes abstracted at the first level of understanding, the rules, the classifications, the comparisons, the contrasting qualities: all those measurement systems, the stories of the extremes, have an advantage for us as individuals, and they had a specific advantage for the emergent civilizations and allowed for the greater maintenance of social and economic organization.

Egan's reference to the Romantic suggests that this first big shift from mythic to romantic systems of knowledge carried an intractable sense of the rejection of the earlier stage. It is not hard to hear the voice of a ten-year-old scolding or deriding a pre-school sibling in the way the Greek historians and philosophers tore into the belief systems of their mythic ancestors. Robert Kegan calls this stage in childhood development Imperial, precisely because we can see, in this stage, the determination of the child to move toward an adult world, and by doing so, reject the earlier ways of knowing. The Romantic stage knowledge tools give the individual a way to claim a place in a larger social world, as someone that can begin to discourse with an adult world about the "real" world, and the challenges one has to face, including the sacrifices and delay of gratification for higher purpose; the difficult journey to reach a life goal. The heroic feats of celebrities, either within the world of family and tribe, or from all sorts of public endeavors, become touchstones for this kind of pre-adolescent. We become obsessed with issues of success, aptitude, accomplishment and their shadows, failure, inadequacy, defeat. As Kegan suggests, far too many of us remain in this stage, incapable of a deeper empathy for ourselves and, as a result, for others. We have our way, or the highway; you are with us, or against us. As individuals. As societies.

The Philosophic

Egan's next stage, the Philosophic, suggests that as the priesthoods of the relatively stable empires worked on increasingly complex reflection on the sacred texts, or larger laws and theories of the physical world, the scientific method began to creep in. The observable world, nature and human interactions, again and again contradicted dogma. The priesthood he associates as the creators of what we call scientific method seem decidedly un-dogmatic and un-priestlike: Plato, Socrates and the Greek philosophers and the Enlightenment era natural philosophers. Growing as they did out of the security of the Romantic perception of higher goals and higher

expectations, the striving for a more ultimate truth carried with it a desire for a new kind of dogmatism.

We source the enlightenment to the particularities of Greek philosophic and social development, but innumerable cultures were facing the tension between a scientific method and dogma. Many heretics in countless cultures sought to source first principles from testing reality and suffered the fate of the social structures that best served unquestioning obedience. We learned through the Greeks that effective science and democracy were, in fact, inseparable. Science – the scientific method of abstracting principles from endless testing and reflection on hypothesis about the fundamental nature of events and things in the observable world – is what we mean by the Philosophic.

Just as a scientific and democratic impulse means the de-centering of authority from an all-knowing power structure, as emotional beings, this stage of adolescent awareness also means the de-centering of ourselves in relations to others. We learn to have a perspective on our own behavior as observable to others, and we can hold both the perspective of ourselves and the perspective of others simultaneously. This ability, like the ability to de-center the limitations of our perceptual apparatus from what is going on in the world, means we can think in relative terms about our own existential place in the universe. Growing from this awareness is the appreciation, as it developed in the latter stage of the industrial era, that the whole project of Western Civilization was merely a path – that our ways of knowing had gaping holes, and those holes were often addressed by competing systems of knowing, including prior systems in a historical model, as well as current alternative systems (East and West).

The Ironic

Plurality and self-aware compassion opened the door for the next stage in Egan's conception, the stage he associates with completing first level training in high school and college and advancing to a "graduate level" perspective. He argues that this is the stage we entered with the modern and post-modern cultures of the 20th Century. He calls the stage Ironic. He didn't mean smarmy technocratic pundits or cynical comedians (though I believe they have preeminence in our present cultures); he meant, similar to the fourth stage of Kegan's model, the ability to see one's worldview as limited and to take the appropriate detached view from it. There are not only no sacred cows, but the artisans that build them, the priests that ordain them, the kings that supply the resource and force the populace to bow before them, the whole enterprise of sacred cow production, is up for derision. For Egan, this is a healthy stance; far from

being relativistic and cynical, it is necessary for further evolution. I agree.

The Integrative/Restorative/ Transcendent

Where Egan stops at this fourth stage, I consider it possible that we are already entering the fifth, and the sixth is in sight. The seventh, as you will see, is the catch all for a much larger evolutionary moment, one which perhaps stays safely in the realm of the utopian imagination.

In my perspective, the emergent stage we see rapidly growing is the Integrative. Where the Ironic allowed us to look at our own worldview – our own cultural biases, as relatively strong or weak in comparison to others, creating the potential for a greater democratic and interpersonal freedom and democracy – the Integrative takes us the step further. In the Integrative era, we see the potential of combining numerous structures of knowing, including those that we simplistically relegated to a historical past, as well as competing systems of complex knowledge and awareness. My fellow Berkeley resident, Fritjof Capra's book, *The Tao of Physics*, suggests in it's title this kind of thinking. Out in California we have a sixty-year history of Integrative Philosophy and intellectual work, based in alternative retreat center's like the Esalen Institute, and academies like the California Institute for Integral Studies, and other East/West institutions. They combine Western scientificism with Eastern estheticism; they see the links between ways of knowing, even as this book is attempting, as essential to the enterprise of the global village we have become. They dissect competing ideologies on their own terms, not as winners and losers or as progressions and hierarchies, but as pieces of an ever complex puzzle, where at some point in human recorded history, someone might have had a useful idea. And that idea might actually prove useful to an aspect of the grand project, which is no longer human survival, but planetary survival.

Which suggests the sixth stage of my model of historical consciousness, the Restorative. From my standpoint, human evolution, and therefore a large scale shift in consciousness, will no longer require a progress that allows greater and greater mastery of the natural world for our exploitation, but instead will require an informed and practical consciousness that puts every human on the project of restoring balance between humans and the planet. I do not think we are close to this as a sweeping consciousness project, despite the feeling that this is the mantra of the deep ecological and non-violent thinking of countless people in all of our societies. I believe we still have to take a vast number of people past the Romantic stage of essentialism and ideology. We

have to have people travel through successful higher education in the Philosophic, over the humbling hump of the Ironic, through the deep accepting of the Integrative, in order to place ourselves on the road to recovery and restoration. Like many people, I think these processes of consciousness are moving faster than they moved in any other time in history. This is useful, since the planetary biological clock is ticking and we need to birth these new ways of thinking to survive.

And what comes after? As with our work in other stages, the crown, the final stage, represents transcendence. From the vantage point here in the Ironic, our transcendence could be in fact the death of the species. Our biological material would work through another few million years of evolution and, with any luck, the next walking, talking, thinking creatures would do a better job. But trusting a bit in the evolutionary impulse, our children, and children's children, may have just what it takes to overcome all that humanity has done to the planet.

Breaking the Silence

Tony Platt

Play Movie

Image credit: Mark Rabine

In the Egan model, unlike our predecessors, who treated an advance in the technology of knowing – methods of abstracting principles, proposing and testing theories based on those principles – as a reason to annialate or repress early systems of knowing, and we are learning to value of each phase of knowing. In Tony's story, a university professor, steeped in Western Tradition, recognizes the loss of ritual, specifically the ritual grieving that surrounds death in his family culture. With his son's death, based on his son's own desires, there was a re-clamation of the death ritual, and a healing through the ritual.

In Tony's story, the process congeals with a social political assessment that the desecration and removal of Indigenous people's for centuries rationalized by the larger scientific project, is an extension of the genocidal colonial tragedy. The return of those remains has become a central demand of indigenous communities and their allies. A mythic appreciation of the sacred, combines with an ironic perspective about historical cultural forces, to create an integrated perspective that calls for cultural, social and political restoration.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *Tony starts his story with the ritual burial of his son on a Northen California lake. While he does not explore his own emotions around this event, he contrasts this loss with his parents in England's choice not to respond to, at least in front of their child, representation of the Holocaust on the family TV. What do you take from Tony's use of contrast between his approach to mourning his son, and his sense of his parent's inability to share feelings in relationship to the Holocaust?*

2. *As Tony's turns the story from a personal narrative to his advocacy perspective for the repatriation of Native peoples' remains, what changes in his use of language?*

3. *The story is also very much a story of place, the Big Lagoon in Northern California, what ways does the centering of the story around land express the concept of restorative awareness?*

Questions

1. *Kieran Egan's recapitulation theory is, in spirit, an imagining of a story-based way of knowing the world. When you look at your own formation as a learner, how does the idea of moving through the stages he suggests ring true to your experience?*

2. *Historical consciousness has an evolutionary component, but also a cultural one. Given that many human cultures still deeply value ways of learning that Egan suggests have been historically supplanted by new ways of learning and knowing, perhaps his or my schema is culturally specific to the Western mind. What do you find useful in looking at learning as a process that mimics the human evolutionary development of culture? What do you find problematic?*

3. *When you delve into evolutionary thinking, as in the ideas of Thomas Kuhn about the nature of scientific revolutions, we are aware that, as whole societies, we are not aware of how much we describe the world in the terms of a limited way of knowing. We can only process knowledge through the lens of the cultural or scientific paradigm we find ourselves within. Great change happens when suddenly the new ways of discovering facts about the world become so discordant with the systems of thinking that the old way of thinking simply collapses under the weight, and a new paradigm arrives. How, in your life as a learner, have you had your world of knowing collapse beneath you to discover a new way of knowing the world?*

Prompt 1 – Fiction Informs Fact

> *"Truth is so hard to tell, it sometimes needs fiction to make it plausible."*
>
> Francis Bacon

The Fictive in literature, poetry, film, and theater are stories that present a reality that could have been, and a truth that is often more clarifying that the the real events.

We are often changed by the fictional stories we have experienced.

Tell a story about the moment a fictional narrative – book, movie, theater, etc. – changed you.

Prompt 2 – Stories of Knowing, Stories of Learning

Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, Ironic – these suggest distinct narratives: a children's fantasy, a comic book adventure, the great novel, a witty hipster take on a hot dog stand in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that also serves sushi.

But in any of our stories, the mystical battle of good against evil can combine with the deeply psychological, the playfully post-modern with the courageous battle against unexpected fortune.

In our lives, we see moments where our old stories inform our new ones; a childhood fascination with snails, our love of baseball heroes, or our getting lost in academia in college become the way we come back to nature with our children, become the way we make sense of our need for heroes, become our renewed appreciation of the joy of discovery through hard messy learning.

Tell a story about re-discovering an earlier enthusiasm. It could be a old favorite subject or topic, a childhood hobby, a place of adventure.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emergent Awareness

Consciousness

a : the quality or state of being aware especially of something within oneself

b : the state or fact of being conscious of an external object, state, or fact

c : awareness; especially

: concern for some social or political cause

: the state of being characterized by sensation, emotion, volition, and thought

: mind

: the totality of conscious states of an individual

: the normal state of conscious life

<regained consciousness>

: the upper level of mental life of which the person is aware as contrasted with unconscious processes

In my original journey of using emergence as a guide to creativity around life story, the focus was on thinking about the way we think. In previous chapters, it was implicit that in observing our lives as an unfolding upward spiral – more like a psychic tornado with stuff flying up and down and around in all directions – we are becoming aware of the way we are aware. But the paradigm discussion did not focus on consciousness itself as a process.

Consciousness and awareness (and here I am using them interchangeably) are very loaded terms. For people of my generation, the concept has two large meanings: one social, one personal. Social awareness meant having an analytical lens through which to see how the ordinary is constructed. It was about reading politically correct books, pondering the vast gulf between accepted reality and, perhaps, a deeper reality. Social consciousness allowed you to see how your reality might have included prejudices that had you performing privilege and power; it addressed an unlearning of a host of "isms". Social consciousness gave you a tool to confront your passivity and develop your agency.

Personal consciousness was the ability to appropriately self-assess for optimum health and well-being. In trying to be personally conscious, we needed to root ourselves in clear values, we had to stare our dragons in the eye, we had to find our true callings, we had to awaken our better, truer selves. The personal process balanced with the social process to give us a higher integrity, free of false consciousness, better able to inoculate ourselves from the ideology of consumer capitalist society and the hypocrisy of dominant order simplifications of

the life process that produced boatloads of value judgments but little in self understanding.

These were idealistic designs for self and society, and these ideas still inform what I hope for in helping people tell and listen to stories of each other's lives. But two decades of our particular practice in storytelling has suggested to me that awareness plays out in small, conflicting patterns – patterns that offer little in terms of certitude. In fact, the more I played with people and their stories, the more I felt that we can have vast parts of our cognitive process crunching layers and layers of complexity in one field of knowing that is separate from ourselves, and be relatively clueless in the vast field of knowing that is our self. We can barely listen to the truth of our own stories, and when we are asked to listen deeply, and invite others to witness our listening, it comes as a revelation.

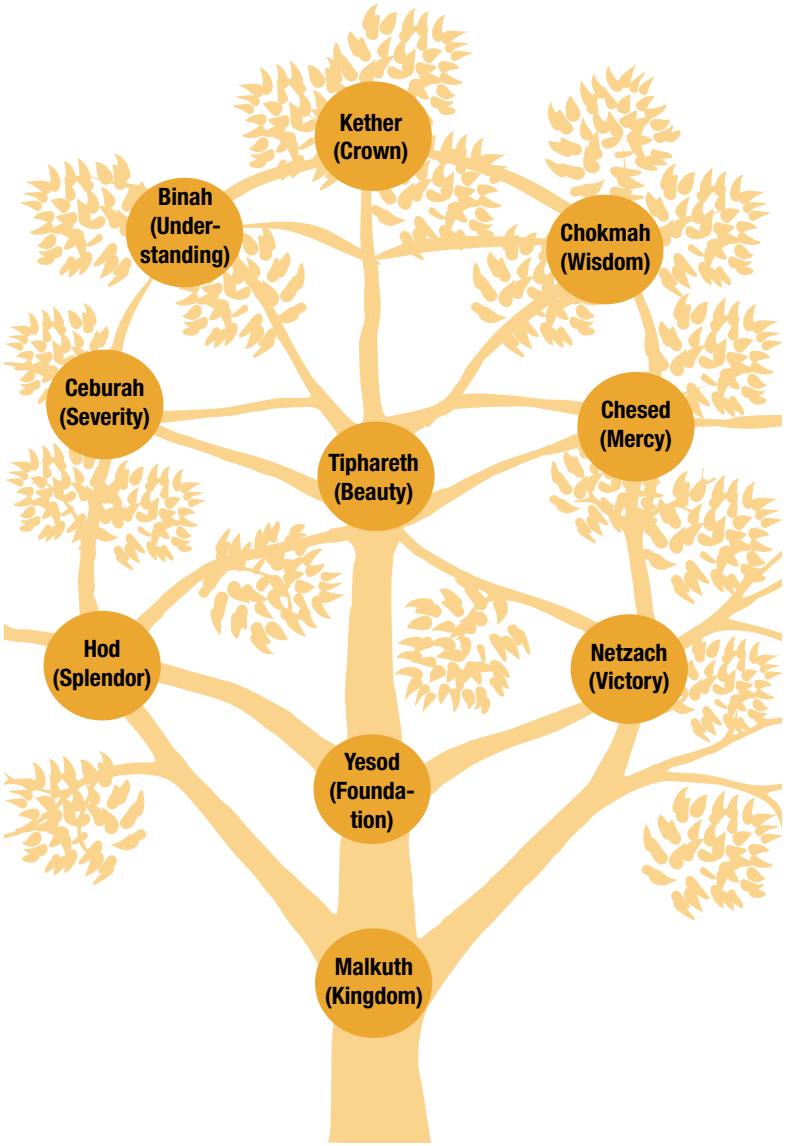
Deep Patterns of Self-Knowing From the Abrahamic Tradition

All spiritual traditions are essentially guides to self and social awareness. I am a spiritual misfit. Or, perhaps better said, I do not subscribe to a singular spiritual tradition, although I am an occasional student of all of them; knowing and more knowing, as far as I am concerned. And you do not play long in the process of helping others share stories before you realize that the search for meaning in experience has one performing spiritually related actions, rituals of remembrance, and that those actions have been mapped for millennia by spiritual authorities.

In all of the spiritual symbolic systems that address emergence as a metaphor of all being – the big bang, if you will – and one being – our journey from birth to death – the Tree of Life from the Jewish Kaballah seems aligned to the thinking of our work here in story. Unfortunately, like most mystical matters, it is not really suitable for superficial inquiry. Folks commit entire lives, and multiple generations of oral and literary transmission, parsing the complexity of such systems.

The ten Sephirot (Sephirah as the singular) are symbolic representations of numerous values or attributes that essentially correspond to the ten ways the infinite or god or eternal manifest themselves to us. For our purposes, and to put this back in the Seven Stages pattern of emergence, many of the ten Sephirot are paired extremes of core characteristics of human interactions that evolve within the life span.

In the Kabbalist tradition, every seven years you repeat a cycle of learning and awareness. After seven such cycles, you begin again, the year fifty being the first year of a return to new awakenings.



In each cycle you learn aspects of various balancing relationships: between generosity and restraint, between passiveness and assertiveness, between understanding and a deeper awareness (wisdom), etc.

In the Jewish Enlightenment process, the Tzaddikim (Spiritual seekers), move through a multi-stage journey of awareness. The paths of learning, respect, and generosity lead to a path of loving kindness; the paths of moderation, purity and joy lead to a path of selflessness; and the paths of awe, equanimity, and heightened mind states, lead to an eternal awareness of oneness – God consciousness.

In this way, the Kabbalah Tree of Life provides a complex mapping of countless interrelationships in life that echoes the Seven Stage pattern of emergence.

The Tree of Life presents an attempt at imagining that our stories always contain the opposing energies of a given intention. We love our parents' nurturance, provision of safety and guide to moral action, but they also represent all that holds us back from flourishing, from self realization, from freedom to re-invent and expand our ways of being and knowing.

We can take from these, and other such deeply thoughtful systems, an idea that the more we explore meaning out of experience, the more we are headed toward a mystical language in the center of sacred processes of reflection. In a sense, the more we

delve, the more language itself becomes inadequate to "telling" the story, and we can see how the listening process is really the "it" of all our storytelling work. Listening to ourselves as we listen to others, listening to how others listen to our stories, and, finally, listening to ourselves as we tell our stories; each of these layers of work reveals new layers of wisdom. It is safe to say that most revealed wisdom comes not from actively talking, reading, and the creative act of putting down words or making images, but from the deep quiet of contemplation after one has listened to others' feedback, as one stops writing and just sits on the ideas; those quiet spaces are when new insights are illuminated.

Cognition and Story

Very early in my work in theater, and certainly as my work became more directly engaged with life story, I became a lay student of cognitive science, a field which has seen as much upheaval and change in my lifetime as any field in science. The brain has moved from being described as a mechanism – a super computing device with command center lobes where firing neurons operate all our various conscious and unconscious processes – to more of a mystic sky with weather patterns of consciousness that can sometimes move around the brain. The brain is fluid, plastic, and adaptable in ways that defy mechanistic description. The brain has also moved from being seen as the home of all cognition, to being seen as a central partner with a conscious body. As various wisdom traditions have always known, we think with our whole embodied apparatus, not just with a brain and nervous system, but with cellular interactions across numerous tissue systems. To feel and to think are the same thing and, more and more, the hard science of neural biochemistry understands how this works.

Memory also resides in interactions in brain and body, and it is with memory that my real interest in cognition focused. Our sort of personal storytelling starts with an act of remembering. It is a complex process of selection and control, the specific events re-framed for purpose and meaning. And many scientists suggest that the act of remembering and forgetting are endless constructions; we can assert an event in our memory as the story is told the first several times, and that event, even with no relationship to the "factual" event, becomes real to us. We can choose to forget and occlude with great success things we simply do not want to remember. As the endless potential purposes and meanings are peeled back through reflection, the stories evolve and change and become something different. In this way, fact and fiction are more or less interchangeable terms from a cognitive standpoint; all non-fiction stories are constructed memories, as the "Roshomon" effect suggests we can all be witnessing the same event;

and what we see inside our own heads, much less what we perceive as meaning, is vastly different.

As specific nouns, descriptive adjectives, and a delicate choice of verbs is made, the story also changes. As we draw on whatever cognitive capacities with language we have to assist us, the thing described becomes more or less real, since most of our categorizing capacities become intertwined with language. Our snapshots of visual memory begin to change as we look for the right way to describe a tree: was it a pine tree, or more generally a conifer? The assignation of given words makes the memory congeal with the interpretation of the category.

But does it really matter? Accepting that we are not providing eye-witness recollection of an important turning point event in our lives is usually not critical to those of us who are encouraging creative writers.

We seek truth (useful meaning), not facts. We accept that an insistence in a legal or journalistic ethos of accuracy is somewhat pointless. Knowing all the facts is an illusory concept in all aspects of our lives. But we still hope for veracity, for most of us want to feel we did our best to remember an experience, particularly one where other characters affected our lives, with utmost effort at the level of awareness that parses truth from facts.

Consciousness and Writing

The Center for Digital Storytelling model of teaching has always been predicated on holding space for heterogeneous groups of learners. People with little background in self-expression find themselves in the same room with people for whom self-expression in words is a core specialization – self-described creative writers or poets. While we do our best to avoid comparative evaluation, we find ourselves excited not so much about the creative turn of phrase or quality of detail in remembrance, but in the movement of the person in their grappling with a story, from one level of understanding to another.

In our story circle process, I have found that almost without exception, people have an uncanny knack for assessing if people have thought through the subject material they have chosen to engage. People can be from dramatically different academic or artistic training, but they can often hear quite specifically what is missing or still needs consideration while someone is describing a story idea. It appears to me that we have an inherent capacity as humans to hear if people are deceiving themselves. A bullshit detector of a different sort – one that allows people to connect with our shared need to explore ever deeper layers of meaning in our experience. It is nearly impossible to self-assess on the same basis; at some level, delusional thinking is always unconscious behavior, and if we could see it for what it was, we would change the story. The story sharing process is a request for deepening consciousness, making you aware of what you might guess has more or deeper meaning or might be a key to unlock the doors of conscious perception. But without the ears of others, you are only guessing where that meaning might lie.

That One Thing

Andria Marshall

Play Movie

Photo by Paige Elizabeth, heritagesessions.com

When we think about the process of losing a parent, of facing death, we are left with any number of ways to journey down into our own consciousness about what it means to be and stay present. In Andria Marshall's That One Thing, it is the nagging idea that in the midst of the trauma of losing her mother, she and her father somehow allowed the coroner to take her mother's body without cleaning her up. That one thing becomes a sense of incompletion in what otherwise was a privileged journey with her mom to the other side.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. Any situation as rich with meaning as the death of a mother has an endless number of lessons that can get unpacked through story. What are the lessons you feel Andria is sharing through her story?

2. How does learning more about Andria's relationship to her mother, both as a child/teen, and as she helped her mom prepare for death, make the request for understanding/forgiveness feel like a new awareness?

3. What did you take from Andria's last line, "Can you hear me?"

Seven Stories – Awareness Through the Mother's Story

My Mother is a Poem, I Will Never Be Able to Write,
Though Everything I Write, Is a Poem to My Mother.

Sharon Dubiago

As an example of this process, let us take the most common story that we see at the Center for Digital Storytelling. A story about one's mother. The first digital stories can also be about other primary relationships, or about our relationship to a core experience or trauma that has greatly shaped us, but the mother story seems to dominate all other stories. We say in our lectures about "owning your insight" in the Seven Steps, that all our stories are about the present moment. Our mother stories change from age five, fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five, fifty-five, sixty-five, seventy-five, etc. This seems obvious enough, but when you unpack the way people think about their mother story, it is not as simple as a "developmental" awareness or maturity process.

If we can accept the working out of your mother story as a core act of consciousness (on which the cliché of the Oedipus fixation in the field of Freudian psychoanalysis is based), then perhaps we can accept the use of the mother story as a placeholder for any number of ways we unpack memories to deepen our consciousness about ourselves and the world.

Rejoice – Generative Awareness

I love my mom.

My parents met in North Carolina, where my mom was born. My dad moved to Texas, and my mother moved there to marry him.

My mom was really strong and had a great personality.

I remember how she would tell stories about all the crazy things she did working as a political organizer. Her stories would make us all laugh.

My mom taught me about working hard and caring about other people. She believed in fairness and thought that everyone deserved to be heard, and everyone deserved to be counted as the same as other people.

I would not be who I am without my mother.

She died more than a decade ago.

I really miss her in my life.

As simple and childlike as this script might be, I can say I may have seen one or another version of this simple tribute five hundred times. When we settle into the act of storytelling, our first impulse is to celebrate.

Whatever complexity might exist, we feel the essence of any story is existence. If I was not there, and the other person was not there, there would be no story. We recognize at our first moments of being that the world and ourselves are miracles, completely intertwined. With our mothers, that is precisely true. The infant does not see itself as apart from the mother or caregiver, but as it was for gestation: simply an extension of one identity. We carry this primal awareness forward, even as the stories of our lives cloud over these simple facts.

A celebratory or tribute narrative can be honed to elegant and emotionally powerful poetry but, as awareness goes, this first blush writing leaves us without the essence of dramatic engagement; there needs to be a challenge, a problem, an issue which the story engages. As an audience, we usually wonder what purpose the celebration serves: is this a new understanding, a return from a journey of alienation? But even thinking these thoughts requires a few additional layers of consciousness. A four-year-old would find the version of the story above more or less complete. By six, though, she might want a little more dramatic action.

React – Stories of Impulse and Support

There were many things my mother was good at, but parenting was not one of them. She would, and did, freely admit it.

While having great affection for her three boys, she spent most of their early lives out slaying dragons in the world. She was called to her many world-changing campaigns as practical necessities. There was work to do, political work, and she simply had to pitch in and do it.

I remember little of my mom caring for me. I was told I slept by my parents door as a small child, curled up like a cat, waiting for them to come out and notice me.

There was no malice, no lack of spoken affection, but that part of caregiving that is about witnessing, about attentive support – I can't say I knew what that looked like. The Lambert boys learned to hold our own in arguments at the dining table – attention required a pugilistic temperament for opinion – the more quixotic the stance, the more noble. We grew up quick and found ways to raise ourselves into men. More or less.

Recently, I read the description of adult children with attachment issues, and I recognized my own story. I have tried my best not to put my own life, my causes and callings, ahead of my children.

My mother didn't help much. I still struggle.

Damn it. Damn it to hell.

Once in a while we have stories that come out as rants, and I always recognize a part of myself in the ranting narratives. Consciousness requires something

to push against, a negative to a positive, in order to push itself forward. I have always had a need to find what's wrong in the world and rail about, and to feel anger is most often a justifiable response to, well, the inherent unfairness in being.

But as often when we hear ranting, we think about angry six-year-olds, children who simply cannot understand why the world does not shape itself to their preference. And we kindly suggest to the teller that a one-sided perspective tells us much more about the teller than it does about the subject of their anger. Evidence of maturity often presents itself as the ability to hold both sides of an argument. The basic capability of forgiveness seems to be a function of a mature perspective.

As the spiral turns, the story of first rejection, first declaration, first accusation, first separation, seems to require dualistic thinking. And the stories that present themselves as rejections of the thing once adored, or the thing once trusted, are a form of consciousness requisite to a whole perspective of one's identity. You have to know what you are not, what you don't like, what you cannot stand, in order to more deeply appreciate where you stand.

The mother story can be the worst experience of one's life. It can be the hardest thing in one's life to wrap one's mind around forgiveness. To seek understanding for the action of someone responsible for your security and well being when that same person did many things to undermine that security and well-being is, at times, impossible.

But the wisdom traditions teach us our own healing passes through this stage to depth in order not to forgive the other, but to find in ourselves the power to not let what happened to us define us.

The hurt is in the story, and sometimes it is good to purgate the ghosts, before trying to reclaim the soul.

Reconsider – Stories of Belonging and Acceptance

The night my father died, I woke up in middle of the night hearing my mom standing at the foot of the stairs, by our front door, talking to a ghost.

"Damn it, George. Why did you have to leave me? What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

I am not sure how long the conversation went on, down in the shadows. I was mostly in shock myself. At seventeen, I was unprepared for a disaster like this: a sudden heart attack, a drive to the emergency room, and then my father, just…gone. The sound of my mother's screaming when they told her he had died was still ringing in my ears.

Weeks later, we talked about the night, and my mom said she really saw him standing there, outside the door, unable to enter.

"He was sad to leave me," she said. "And sorry for the trouble he caused."

"Someday I might forgive him."

I learned about my mother's pain in that period. I learned to accept pain as part of life.

The Kegan model from Chapter Three suggests that as we move from the Imperial stage of self-centeredness to the Interpersonal stage of connection, sympathy and compassion for others, we are for the first time able to hold our own needs and the needs of others in our minds simultaneously. Implicit in this understanding is that we are now aware of one-sided perspectives, in ourselves as well as in others.

That doesn't mean we are incapable of selfishness, but our selfish moments get tinged with guilt. We are raised to believe in the Golden Rule. But many of us, and at times most of us, situate ourselves in black and white perspectives about others and their needs. We let our inner emperor take over. But human relationships, the family, the tribe, and later the larger community, the nation, the world, can be encompassed by an interpersonal perspective.

We can find a way to hold, as the loving kindness meditation suggests, that even our enemies want the same things we want: to be safe, happy, healthy, and at peace.

In stories about our mothers, this may just start with a feeling beyond celebratory Mother's Day tribute, beyond a reasoned critique that mentions strengths and hammers weaknesses, to a simple holding of the person's suffering, as if you could imagine it as your own suffering. For some of us, that may be a revelation, as stuck as one can be in a dysfunctional judgment culture. But, almost always, compassion releases the weight of the burden we felt our mothers, or anyone in a primary relationship to us, put upon us. More importantly, it also releases the burden of carrying that weight within us.

Revise – Stories of Partnership and Integrity

My mother was a mule, strong and stubborn. This was especially true of relationships; if she decided you were her opponent, well, god help you. But if she decided you were a person that she wanted to befriend, you were befriended for life.

She found my father when he was passing through Greensboro, North Carolina. She decided she liked him. And followed him to Texas. That was that. My father stood no chance.

At my mother's funeral, former Governor Ann Richards described my parents as "the only true soulmates" she had known. To me, my parents were not so much soulmates as soul survivors, hanging on to each other as life preservers, romantically bonded I am sure, but more practically bonded to endure the particularly difficult journey they set for themselves as lifelong anti-establishment troublemakers.

My mother's female friends were as critical to her as her husband. She had several truly soulmate friends who shared the issues of fighting for space for women in political leadership, of raising children while staying active, coping with the loss of husbands, and managing new careers.

As someone deeply committed to social change, she needed these relationships. Like my father, she fell far from the tree, leaving the Southern Protestant community and joining a cosmopolitan New Deal coalition of modern thinkers. Her politico friends were her family, and their bonds were as unshakable as family.

So close was my mom with one of her best friends that two weeks after my mom died, Venola, without having any immediate health crisis, just up and died as well. Venola must have thought, "If Latane isn't around to talk politics, why should I bother?"

Something inside my mother knew exactly how important deep, enduring relationships were to her well-being.

She worked hard at them. They worked for her.

As we watch our parents, we assess their relative ability to maintain and sustain personal and social ties. We drop into another level of awareness about the central functioning principles of our lives: those dealing with trust and commitment.

I once heard that enduring relationships are as much about self-awareness as they are about connection to or understanding of our intimate others. One could say that the awareness that comes with compassionate interpersonal awareness is enough to create powerful, enduring relationships, but as any of us who have maintained long-term relationships as a mate, working partner, or friend probably know, compassion and passion are not enough. You have to re-invent yourself from the person seeking wholeness in connection to others as a young adult, to someone whose own wholeness can sustain and care for others in long-term commitments. And we, as re-invented, free-standing adults, have to continually re-negotiate the relationship between our deepening awareness of our needs, the factors that contribute to our health and well-being, and the responsibilities we have accepted to keep our promises to others.

At this stage of awareness, we can tell stories about what others mean to us with increasing clarity. In our public workshops, we have a preponderance of folks that have "done the work." They are the seeker types, self-actualizing through an array of current processes of mindfulness and awareness, and this is how they find themselves drawn to our workshop model. What I find in the writing is a gentle sureness about meaning, about the service of the story, usually – but not always – about a re-assessment of a primary relationship: mother, child, grandparent, sibling. They can trust that a story about a specific incident, with details chosen carefully, can reveal larger meaning and value with complexity and paradox.

This may be the gift of the poetic mind, to stand just deep enough in the mud of one's own life to be sturdy in your observational capacities about others. This squishy solidity allows us to see others' own flailing in the swamp and to recognize their valiant effort and to desire to use language to assist them and, no doubt, ourselves, to keep our relative balance. Or failing that more ambitious purpose, to at least lift us for a moment. And allow us to wipe some of the crusty layers away to reveal what remains of us below.

Reclaim – Stories of Justice and Dignity

We were preparing dinner.

I'm sure something was being fried.

My wife Judy and I were trying not to talk politics. Something had made her grumpy, and we guessed it had to do with an argument about liberalism we had earlier in the day. As Radical Marxists we had little room for band-aid progress; you could always make things a little better, but people would not be free until the whole system was changed.

"You are Maoists," my mom said, although I heard it as Marists in her North Carolina lilt, and I thought about a sweaty French priest in New Caledonia trying to bring salvation to Polynesians.

Neither Judy nor I appreciated the label; we thought of Maoists as bug-eyed purists, fanatic and unstable. We were Third World liberationists, and Mao was accepted in the canon, not as the despotic leader of modern China, but as the romantic Mao of the Long March, a wily military fox who outran the fascists in his country. Our politics, despite our rhetoric, were left of center by any standard outside the U.S. We were accepting of electoral progressive strategies, working within systems, but we wanted more, we believed more was possible.

But my mom was a New Dealer, herself briefly in the American Communist Party – but not a long time Red, a pure American radical, always looking to forward a

cause in deeply pragmatic ways. And as only a left liberal in the American South can be, quixotic, more of an agitating mosquito buzzing the ears of the elite, than someone likely to ever see the inside of power. She accepted that the reveille for radicals was gradualism, disconnected from revolutionary strategy, and certainly revolutionary rhetoric.

Judy left the room.

"Mom, you know damn well you would be just like me if you were twenty-two-years-old."

"I know honey, but nobody is going to listen to anyone talking about revolution in Texas. I know folks are all excited in California, but trust me, you better set your sights a little lower. Like slowing down it getting worse for people, as opposed to assuring it will get better."

"People can change."

"They have and do, but it takes time."

As we pass these stages of awareness, there is no straight line. The shade of difference between that black and white sensibility of moral right and wrong of the first grader, and the mature perspective that moves the concerns about care and doing right for one's family, one's colleagues and clan, to a concern that draws toward more complex universal principles, is hard to ascribe to duration of lived experience. My ten-year-old daughter's sense of injustice is already deep and unswerving, and she can already parse fairness in complex, politically astute ways.

What we can say is that as one grows to a certain level of maturity, one sees service to a larger cause, to the larger purpose of abetting human suffering, as more and more central to one's consciousness. Whether you are coming from a liberal or conservative perspective, expectations of service, of citizenship, of responding to suffering, large and small, grow deep in most of our hearts, and a call to civic leadership or greater social responsibility moves from an option to a core part of identity.

Giving voice to your social consciousness is usually easier for mature people. Lived experience allows us to feel more confident in the nuance of our assessments, helping us to step back from overheated argument and work toward a more balanced perspective. And while we may be misguided, we are not as fearful of the judgment of others, so we may recognize that confrontation is sometimes unavoidable. We can see that passivity has unexpected results, just as action.

Resolve – Stories of Insight and Understanding

I learned about drinking from my mother.

I never saw her drink during the day, but she kept a half gallon of vodka under the desk in her study. As

with most of her women friends, they were operational drinkers, able to balance what their body could process, with what they had to accomplish. Never drunk, never exactly sober, she plowed through her life.

When my mom was seventy-five, she accepted the fact that she had always lived with depression. This was her own mother's legacy: Southern women who made stoicism an art form.

She lived to be eighty-four, outliving one of her sons who died the prior year (himself a victim of alcohol and emotional isolation). At some point she told me that if she knew she would live so long, she would have taken better care of herself.

I have spent many years away from drinking. But I continue to enjoy my evening glass of wine. I have found a way to moderate. I now recognize that depression is not always a guest that introduces its impending arrival. The blues can settle in and before you realize it, they are part of the scenery. I have come to understand that booze and the blues should not be mixed.

When I am feeling myself retreating into self-imposed emotional exile, I try to remember my mom's quiet. She never wanted to impose herself on others. These were her problems. She would sort them out.

I sometimes feel that same voice in my head. But I resist it. I need others to help me. I need to share my stories. My well-being will always be based on asking for, and surrendering to, the help I need.

We can live a whole life with some part of ourselves in the shadow of forgetfulness. Some stories, some dark corners of our relationship to ourselves, to those who have loved us, or we have loved, remain obscure. The moment people decide to tackle these stories for the first time, crisis may not be far away. The vault of certain pain – we can call it trauma, but it really is impossible to name what it might be for any one individual – is hard to open without the release of dark, powerful energy. Energy we subconsciously knew was bound to overwhelm us, so we tend to want to keep it locked deep in the vault. But it never stops working on us, never stops degrading some part of our well-being.

In the safety of a supportive and loving circle of listening, with one person or a group, we learn these secrets are not as dark or sad or embarrassing as we thought. They are part of being alive. We can have compassion for ourselves and accept the dark and light aspects of our being as necessary. We are mud and clear water, shadow and technicolor.

All of us would prefer to evolve our understanding and insight to become as healthy as possible. When we are stuck, it is in part because we do not see an alternative.

In my work with story, I meet all kinds of people: those who are already on a path of evolving self-awareness and those that have some resistance to using story as a mechanism for recovery and wellness. I do not insist that stories have to deal with the dark, difficult and muddy issues of one's being. But I usually suggest that the opportunity for using the experience to dig in the muck may be useful. As often as not, people take the risk and are rewarded for their efforts.

At this level of conscious awareness, we recognize the endless nature of consciousness work. There is no real destination, only new layers to explore and new ways of returning to the same material for additional insight. You always have much more work to do, more stories to share. And you find that your ability to delve deeper makes you want to delve deeper still.

Rebirth – Stories of Transcendence and Wisdom

I arrived late to the hospital.

My mother had been dead an hour.

My guess is that she had no desire to have her loved ones shepherd her to the other side.

It had been a seven month descent, from a massive stroke in late November to her final passage at the end of May.

At times, I had played the role of caretaker. Flying from California to Texas numerous times to observe her progression, to hope for recovery, to delve into my feelings about watching someone slowly dying.

I stood by her bedside, observing her body. I was feeling less remorse about almost arriving in time for seeing her alive for the last time, than finality at the permanence of her being dead for all time.

I felt dull. All of my life, prior to that year, death had such a hold on me.

After my year of visiting the inert bodies of a brother, a business partner, and now my mother; death had less mystery to me.

Dead bodies were tissue.

The person was gone.

That was that.

Proximity had made death mundane.

You could die young, you could fight through to a longer life, but when it was over it was over.

Make the most of it. Stay present. Breathe.

The rehearsal for death starts at birth, and in this way the two events are simultaneous. All the wisdom traditions have at their center of their efforts the

acceptance of the impermanence of all things… starting with our bodies. We become in every moment; we un-become in every moment.

I have to assume that the great lesson of ever deepening awareness, of enlightenment, is acceptance. Whether we believe in the immortality of our souls, or we can be satisfied with the recycling of the atoms and molecules that were once a specific life form, to feed or at least re-enter other life forms, acceptance allows for a re-birthing process.

In our storywork as we relieve ourselves of the burden of permanence, we allow the possibility of newness. Our own near death experience, or continued proximity to death as an inescapable presence in our lives, prompts us to challenge everything we consider certain about how we choose to live our lives. Holding impermanence in our consciousness allows our assessments to be as fluid and dynamic as life itself.

All our stories can be re-told through this new lens of the acceptance of impermanence.

Go Around

Cathy Jaynes

Play Movie

Image courtesy of Cathy Jaynes, PhD, RN,
The Center for Medical Transport Research, visit tcmtr.org

The light of consciousness often grows out of the darkness of challenge. Over the years our organization has had the privilege of working with the Air Medical Transport community to capture stories of pilots, nurses, and paramedics in one of the most stressful professions imaginable.

Cathy's story has her balancing the ability to assert herself in critical professional situations with a growing sense of her authority, of voice, in her personal life.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. *Cathy provides a minimal amount of information about her personal history, in setting the tone for the story of a perilous night at work. How does that information affect the way you understand the story as a story of emerging awareness?*

2. *In part the story is about communication and preparation in a professional setting, essentially a training video, what does providing the detail of a prior situation where the pilot ignored her, make us aware of the shift in her sense of authority, of personal power?*

3. *As with many digital stories, as much power comes from the choice of images, and the information they provide, as the words spoken, what way does visual treatment support and expand this story?*

Questions

1. The term "consciousness" is loaded with connotations that suggest the pragmatic, the mystical, the deeply personal, the broadly social. Discuss the associations one has with the idea of developing higher or deeper consciousness.

2. The Sephirot of the Kabbalah Tree of Life make issues of balance between that which gained and understanding that perhaps there is something lost. One can be more clear-headed and have deeper perspective as one gets older, but one also loses childlike wonder and innocence. One can be more assertive but lose a natural attentiveness to others. As you have gone through life, discuss how gaining one level of conscious awareness affects earlier ways of understanding the world for better or for worse.

3. The mother story could be any number of stories that demonstrate how one's attitude about a core relationship – to a person, to a group, to society, to other species, to nature, etc. – shifts through time. What are some of the other relationship stories that show one's development of new and different levels of awareness?

Prompt 1 – What Else?

Tell a story about your mother.

Prompt 2 – Light out of Darkness

"The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for.
And the most you can do is live inside that hope."

Barbara Kingsolver

Choose a time in your life of emotional upheaval and change. Write about an event at that time that reflected the inverse of the feelings of loss, confusion, or despair; where you observed something, heard something, read something, or did something that provided a glimpse of contrasting light against the darkness. Take us into this moment of possibility.

CHAPTER SIX

The Creative Process

"Don't wait for the muse. As I've said, he's a hardheaded guy who's not susceptible to a lot of creative fluttering. This isn't the Ouija board or the spirit-world we're talking about here, but just another job like laying pipe or driving long-haul trucks. Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day from nine 'til noon. Or seven 'til three. If he does know, I assure you that sooner or later he'll start showing up."

Stephen King

I was asked, in our first webinar series, why this stage did not come earlier. "I wish I had considered aspects of my own creative process as part of the work of reflection and writing during the course."

And you could start here. After all, we are born into natural creativity. We explore the world through playful recreation; we can trust ourselves and our voices as they are, as we find them, at any point in our lives.

But my original argument was that voice, authentic creative voice, emerges most powerfully from reflection across many fields of knowing. Just as you mature into a greater and greater reclamation of self, you also can gain from placing your creative process in the context of knowing your own nature, your own body, your own stage of life, where you stand in a learning process, and your path of greater consciousness.

So as we have traveled over the stories that emerge from these different ways of knowing, you may or may not have thought much about the way you create. Or where an effort to master creative voice might take you, as steps along a path. This chapter explores one framework of creative process and suggests both the way to approach a task of creativity – honing one short story, or developing a novel, play, or screenplay – as well as the longer process of developing your specialized expertise as a professional creative.

Understanding Creative Process – A Starting Point

Way back in the early nineties, when we were joining other folks looking at hypermedia, web design, and interactive screen design as a new art form, a book by Scott McCloud, called *Understanding Comics*, became an important reference for our efforts. It turned out that thinking about sequential pictorial narrative, from hieroglyphics to the modern four panel cartoon strip, was an extremely useful metaphor for the way we clicked from one page to the next to tell a story.

As it happened, Scott was invited to our very first Digital Storytelling Festival in Colorado in 1995, and we got to know more about his perspective on art-making and how it might inform the digital arts. His

thinking certainly influenced the way I developed the Seven Elements of Digital Story for the first Digital Storytelling Cookbook which came out the next year.

McCloud did a great job of telling the story of graphic storytelling in Understanding Comics, but the part of the book that caused the most interest and excitement was his Chapter Seven, the Six Steps.

The Six Steps follows the journey from enthusiast to initial training, to developing craft – and the long slog to professional capability, if not success – to mastery and innovation in the field. Implicit in his idea of evolving mastery was the idea that in any creative process, any attempt at melding specialized knowledge with invention, you needed to pass through basic clarifications about content and form that evolve as you work through the narrative material and your understanding of the communicative possibilities of the form you have chosen for your expression.

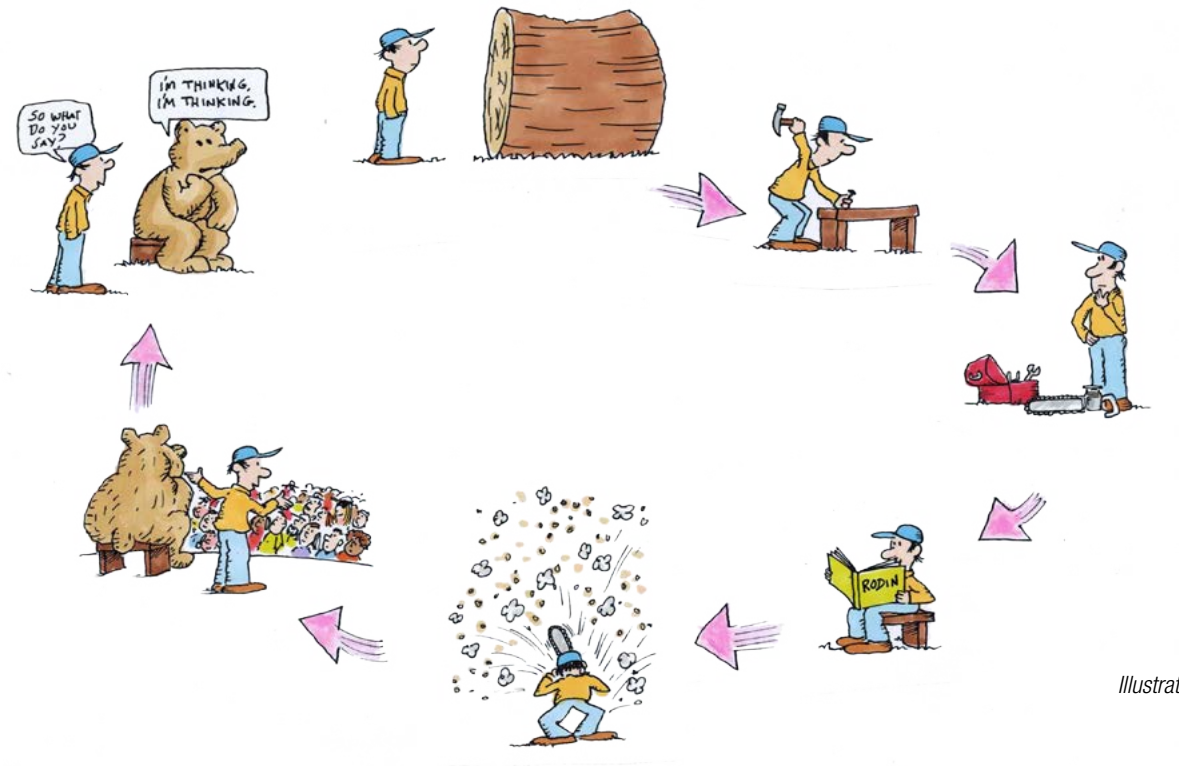


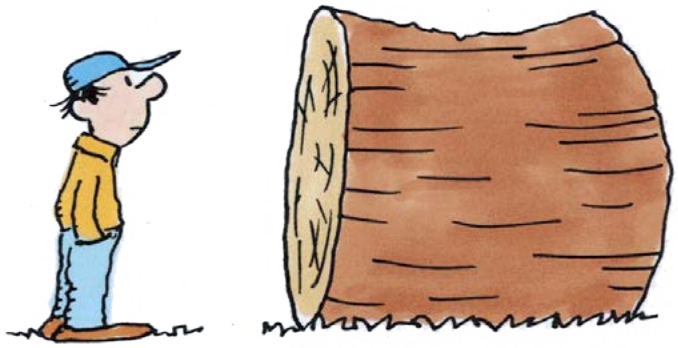
Illustration by Mitchell Rose

We can take these ideas of working over a long period to master an art form, and re-consider them in the light of a more specific or fixed process of creativity. Every person has their own version of a creative process, but my hope is that one can find some symmetry between the discussion of evolving perspective in life and evolving your awareness about creativity.

These emergent processes mimic the other stages in interesting ways – the biological from seed to fruition, the corporeal from base to crown and back again.

Tapping Your WellSpring

All stories start with an idea, but in the way I think about creative process, they start with a forming perception of new insight about one's life, the people around us, and the world we live in.



We have used numerous metaphors for how one might imagine connecting to an original idea, but the idea of tapping into a deep spring is perhaps the most appropriate. We live with some 40,000 thoughts a day; undoubtedly a few hundred are related to a deep-seated need to express something that provides a clarifying perspective on what our lives and experiences have brought us to at any given point.

Countless creative people have said that their best ideas emerged from not thinking, in the middle of a long walk, or in the space between consciousness and unconsciousness just before or emerging from sleep. This suggests that the metaphor extends to divining – not digging down into an earth with pick and shovel, but escaping into a state that allows us to let our unconscious divine a location where a leak of the creative can emerge and perhaps flow forth, where the distance between the surface noise of our lives and the rich clear awareness we carry around inside us is most shallow. Artists, scientists, creative writers, and designers all exercise these divining skills to survive, but we all know the feeling: an idea like a like a drop of knowing, with great pressure behind it, tingles inside our minds. Occasionally, the muse of creation bubbles up through the crust of daily cognition, and we happen to have a pen or keyboard at hand to jot them down, and we are able to tap the buckets of imaginative insight that lays below.

Those are great moments, but what can we do in the meantime?

First Thoughts Count

"To express yourself in a creative way you don't need structure you need an empty mind."

E'yen A. Gardner

In our practice, as we have encouraged in this workbook, facilitated writing prompts, with very limited times to respond, often force one to jump on a passing train of thought without worrying about where it is taking you. This seems to work much better in group environments than sitting by yourself, because allowing yourself to write is easier when it appears everyone else is already writing.

But you can do it. Take a look at a writing prompt. Read an article. Explore a poem or a passage of a novel. Then close your eyes, sit comfortably and quietly for thirty seconds, take four or five deep breaths, empty your mind out, perhaps repeating a few times to yourself, "No thoughts." It only takes a few seconds to clear your head and relax.

Then pick up your pen, or place your hands on your keyboard, and write what comes to mind. As often as not, the idea, the thought that surfaces, has some precedence for you; it is already at a depth of your own knowing well below the surface.

And then the trick is to keep working with the idea allowing whatever came from the initial impulse to travel down a few additional levels. The muse is waiting somewhere down this road as long as you are willing to keep the momentum headed in a direction, and inevitably surprise awaits you.

Silencing the Editor

What makes many people cease their work as writers or creatives is a voice that appears in your head suggesting that you have no business being creative. Creativity is for creative people, for god's sake! All of us, at some point in our lives, have faced the first voice of the editor. It is usually the first time one is "graded" or "assessed" for a creative act (and all learning is a creative act) when the assessment came out as something you heard as lacking, uncompetitive, less than, incomplete, etc.; then you told yourself, I cannot do this thing, this creativity process. And you slowly learned to stop trying. And like all negative assessments, eventually they are self-fulfilling.

While clearing your mind helps you to kick-start the process, you need emotional security to continue working on the piece of writing. George Plimpton referred to John Steinbeck's cure for creative block; to paraphrase, "Don't write thinking about an audience or an editor; think about someone you like." It could be your best friend, a sibling, a mentor character – someone who likes you and thinks you are great.

They do not even have to be real or someone with whom you have an actual relationship. You could imagine a celebrity you like, or a favorite character in a novel or television show. Starting a piece of writing as a postcard to a person you trust almost always opens up some room for exploration, because you know that person would be happy to listen to you "work things out." Visualizing that person nodding at your digressions and accepting your open questions, doubts, confusion, as part of your process, immediately allows you to feel free to explore where writing takes you without worrying about what the final outcome might be.

This is what makes writers' groups so important. At heart, they are gatherings of people that have learned to trust each other, to behave as friends, not as editors. They understand that creative juices only flow if there is an unobstructed channel to their initial expression. They can appreciate the fear and loathing inherent in jumping feet first into sharing an idea or a first draft.

If you don't have a trusted correspondent yet, then imagine who that person would be. As likely as not they are someone just like you, who knows exactly what he feels like to be vulnerable in the creative act.

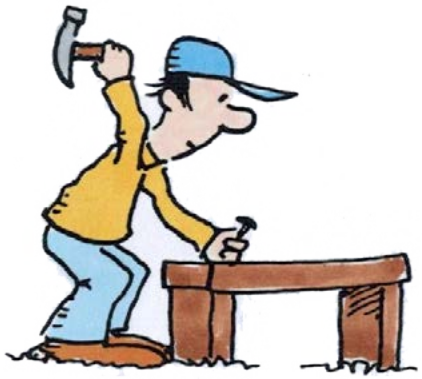
Allowing Relationships to Occur

Another part of the process of tapping the wellspring is appreciating the random way that thoughts collide and form relationships that themselves have surprising or provocative meaning. Digressions are what the mind does, and they are never essentially good or bad. You may start with the subject of a family member overcoming disease and find yourself writing about gardens and weeds. That relationship may never have occurred to you, but the metaphor is suddenly rich with potential meaning.

For some writers, freely associated lists of thoughts, ideas, words, or concepts unlock potential relationships. We have used this simple prompt: make a list of ten things you love and ten things you abhor, and choose one from each column, find a relationship, and write about them. The odd thing is that the mirror for the two things becomes apparent – the idea below the first blush of an emotional response. My first thoughts were baseball and cooked carrots. Where is the story there? Perhaps it is a meditation on the color orange, because of my home team and the vegetable. Or perhaps it is an essay about the problem of taking something pure and good when it is raw and natural and ruining it with processing and over cooking it – something I obviously dislike with carrots, but also dislike about professional sports in the modern era.

As you work through ideas, it may also feel like you have too many, endless loops upon loops, a fractal digression. Eventually there will be a time to stop and assess the pattern you have created. Up close it may not have made a great deal of sense, but a step or two back, looking from above, you see that idea A did in fact connect to idea G, and idea B, fits nicely with idea L. The relationships revealed themselves eventually ands now they can be re-structured to explore more deeply.

Building Your Foundation



In McCloud's context, you move from idea to form. Will your story be a mural or a poem, a docudrama or a novelette? In a similar way, we see the creative step from first draft to the strong bones of a coherent narrative project as a decision about what you want that project to be.

Any small idea, the work of an eight minute prompt, has within it the seeds of a large narrative project. Any one piece of writing about a character can become the basis of a long form narrative. In this chapter, we are less concerned about the steps of building up an overarching text than we are connecting with ways of approaching revision and consideration of possible directions for a writing project to develop.

You may have aspirations for extended writing projects – an extended life review or autobiography, perhaps – but each portion of that project will need its own process of structuring and consolidation.

Shaping the Idea

We have just finished our writing prompts, and we ask ourselves, "Where to next?" I happen to love what comes out of a quick writes, the rawness and unpredictability, but there is always something that could be shifted or changed to communicate a bit more clearly the core of the idea as efficiently as possible.

Any idea should feel plastic. It is not a brick, fired and hard, but a lump of mud. You may love that mud, but there is no reason to feel overly attached to it. The original version can always be saved. But now it is something that can be played with, re-arranged, put

together in various ways, subtracted from and added to in countless ways.

The attitude of flexibility is difficult for some of us. We like what we write, and we more or less feel it should stay as it emerged from the swamp of our souls. Raw carrots. But the carrot can be sliced, shredded, chopped, designed into cute little carrot flowers, even mixed with other ideas to become a salad...whatever, but still served fresh, and as raw as you prefer.

As you play with the original material, you will find that any number of experiments result in pleasant surprises. Perhaps the beginning becomes the end. Maybe the section in the middle disappears, the first paragraph jumps naturally to the fourth, and there is a different ending.

Or perhaps you have a way to take one sentence – maybe the next to last one in the next to last paragraph (I almost always find something good there) – and build an entirely new piece of writing out of that one thought.

Seeing and Hearing

Sometimes first drafts do not land into scene, into moments. They fly through time and space with broad and general statements and descriptions, helping us to get out the sweep of a story, but short on the details. Only on the return to the text can we see what we could have done to make the writing feel visceral and alive.

Besides immersing an audience in the text, considering what moments or scenes deserve further development helps to generate the next level of structure to the story. As we read our story back to ourselves for the first time, it may become quite apparent which moment should be more explored, because we are not able to “hear” or “see” the meaning clearly. Broad strokes describing the process of our aunt moving into nursing care leave us feeling like there is no way to connect to the emotions. The facts are there, but not the feelings.

These processes of revision, of re-vision, of hearing what the writing sounds like, are inherently sensual. Our minds are testing the material by evoking both image and sound (and smell, taste and touch for that matter). Even for our own ears, what we see and hear as we read the story back in our heads gives us a first clue about the effectiveness of our writing.

Perhaps we are not ready to refine or expand the scenes in the writing, but we have a few ideas about where to land and a few simple descriptive touches that will strengthen the structure.

Imagine a first draft of the story about the three month process of getting our aunt to move out of her home and into a nursing care facility. We followed the steps

chronologically and passed by the day when she agreed to move with the line, “I remember the day at her house. We had coffee and we sat for an hour before she finally agreed it was time to move.”

Structurally, we have a sense that this may be a decisive moment, the crux of the story. We could even start with this scene and tell the story as a flashback before and a continuation after that moment. The scene suddenly presents itself to us with all the sensual details. We can see the discomforting pattern of the wallpaper as we stared into space, or how the clouds passing by changed the way light fell through a window. We saw the fearful look on our aunt’s face, the color of the light and shadow as it fell on her hands on the table, the nervous way she fiddled with her coffee cup. We hear her say quietly, “I am not sure I should stay here.” And we remember the sound of the bell of the dryer ringing in the other room. We can still taste her cinnamon-scented coffee, lukewarm and weak, as she reached across to grab our hand.

Suddenly the frame of the story invites filling out, and we have a sense of where the writing could head in its next iteration.

First Audience

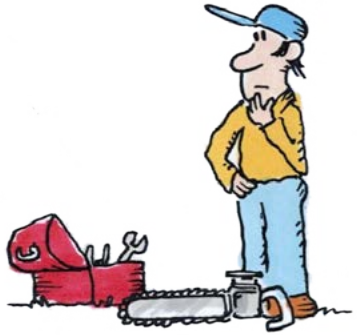
The structuring of your work can only go so far as a purely internal experience. At least until you reach an extraordinarily well developed sense of craft and voice, you really need to have someone, or several someones, reflect back to you to what degree your intention and your reception are in congruence.

It is always amazing to those of us who teach creative writing how different we hear, see, understand the same text. You say, “Nobody really cared if I took part in the project, so I just forged ahead with my own idea.” And I think you are expressing healthy disregard for others’ opinions, and the person next to me thinks you are expressing self-pity and resentment. Our feedback obviously tells you more about us than about your piece of writing. But the lack of clarity, the ambiguity, may not be what you intended. You can take a note to consider if that means you need to structure part of your writing for more specific meaning. Or you may decide that ambiguity, or irony, was precisely your intended response.

When you share in a writing group – again, a group you trust and know is well facilitated – you are looking first for positive affirmation and second for general patterns of consensus of what might be considered for amendment or shift in structure. At the largest level, your ideas, how the piece is focused, what larger meaning we could take from the writing, is reasonably well understood...or not. First level feedback usually is not helpful for editorial refinement.

It is neither wise nor generally effective to get refined, specific editing feedback from a group. As one moves to refinement, even with the best of intentions of your writing group friends, you can almost guarantee that the individual voices of any editor will conflict with the individual voices of other editors. Instead of getting help, the result will likely be confusion, frustration, and the derailing of your own process.

Assessing Your Resources



As you move through your creative process, inevitably you reach a stage where you know, more or less, what you would like as a finished product and how you might imagine it being used or published. But the road between where you are with your first drafts or plans and where you might want your work to be is still long and twisted. At this point, the most important perspective to bring to the work is on what resources you can put to the effort. Ambition needs boundaries, and those boundaries can cover any number of considerations, but for our purposes we will address three: time, context, and the degree to which you are investing your soul into the effort, which I will call here truth-telling.

Time

The most obvious resource to consider is time. Most creative projects want to become open-ended affairs and, as a result, most creative projects remain unfinished. In our workshop settings, we suggest everyone finish a project in the alloted time. And we joke that, just like in building a house, the first 90% is easy, the second 90% is damn near impossible. As we frame up our ideas, refine them at the first level as structure and focus, we find that bringing the story to a final script, even for a short piece of writing, never seems to end. Creative projects can be refined forever, so at some point the deadline is your only friend. Not only does it focus the mind, it forces closure.

We always suggest that the map of a creative project have appropriate markers of achievement along the way – deadlines for each part of the process, as well as the overall completion. By setting these process deadlines, you also break the larger task into whatever small pieces make sense, making each manageable for your schedule and for your sanity.

Creative Context – Play versus Payoff

Many folks find workshopping processes more satisfying than the formal announcement of an independent creative project. For years, as a professional theater person, the pleasure I saw in writers, actors, and directors who were simply "workshopping" a play or production evaporated into fear and crankiness with the first announcement of the scheduled formal opening. We easily turn creative play into creative pain simply by making our product release intentions public.

Yet at the same time, the thrill of an opening night, the promise of great reviews and full houses, the entire gamble of all creative experiences, provides an extraordinarily powerful and positive motivation for focused and sustained efforts. We want to have our efforts appreciated, to find audience, to hopefully change hearts and provoke minds.

Any calculus of creative effort balances between the degree to which our process of creative exploration is encumbering the creation of a final product, and our need to have a final product stifles our creativity. The well-known theater company Wooster Group (which brought us Willem Defoe, Spalding Gray, and Kate Falk, among others) never seemed to "open" a show; they sold tickets, they would even receive write-ups about a workshop production, but explicitly the productions were presented as workshops to remove from the audience expectation that what one audience saw on a given night would be generally the same as what was seen another night. Similarly, in these days of digital distribution, a website is never really done, and our audiences can act as our editors, to some degree, pointing out one or another deficiency or preference which can be addressed in an unending reciprocation. Even e-books can update without the next buyer knowing that they had an "updated" version.

But putting a project to bed also means that other projects can be assumed, other shows can be considered. So for any project, make up your mind about whether the payoff of the delivered product or the process of the continued play is in your best interest for the given moment of your life and effort.

Truth-telling

Not everyone creates for audiences. Not everyone cares if their work is accepted. In the West, we have the very strong archetype of the lone creative genius, a person working in poverty and marginalization, free of both social and cultural expectations to re-invent the idea of art forms, the meaning of art, the entire edifice of creativity. Between that archetype and the pure "creative-for-hire" professional that only picks up a brush when the commission check arrives, there are a whole spectrum of possibilities.

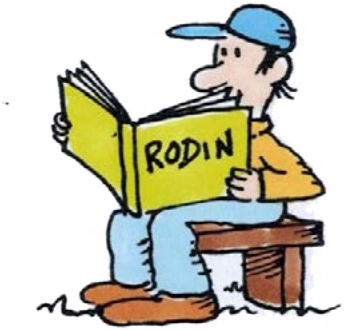
The concept of pure creativity for creativity's sake begs the question of your soul's purpose. Just as was discussed in the prior chapters, in this third rung of the ladder, the space between first emergence and encompassing acceptance, the adolescent stage of the third chakra, we have to make up our mind a bit about who we really are and what we really want. We have to do the gut check of truth-telling about our purpose.

When we start exploring a creative project, when we start exploring a creative career, our ambitions may have us mastering the form, succeeding publicly to broad acclaim, and finding a way to sustain our creative work through our creative efforts. Of course, as McCloud discussed in his reflections on becoming a professional comic book artist, the road to success comes to many forks where you are essentially asked, what are you willing to exchange for that success? On the single project level, and on the lifelong ambition level, there are significant trade-offs. What do you know about yourself going into a project? – if you are most truthful, that allows you to assess how much focus and time you are willing to put toward the process. My guess is that if you are reading a book about exploring creativity, this is a significant issue for you. You may want all the pleasure of being creative, but fear the price. This is why you cannot simply throw yourself into sleepless nights of mucking around with throwing words on pages while you still have a day job, a family, a mortgage, and a sense of responsibility to others that mitigates your effort. You need a way to calibrate the risk-reward of some life-sustaining creative work.

The good news is that just like eating healthy food, practicing yoga, walking, meditating, dancing, kissing, praying, gardening, and just plain playing, any amount of creativity is good for you. If you write one poem or short piece of writing per year and share it with your Facebook friends, you will acquire a benefit. That benefit might be just what your soul required.

In one way, I disagree with McCloud about professional refinement. The only difference I see between the lay and professional creative is scale, not necessarily quality. A committed amateur could work on one good comic book (or, more fairly, one four panel strip) for a long time, and if they stayed true to their soul, and if this was the story that only they could tell, it could be a significant work of art. But after they finished, it might not be likely they could re-produce that artifact. Nor could they explain exactly what made the work important to themselves, much less to any one else. Their ability to abstract the theory, apply the rules and refine their methods of craft would be lacking. In the end, an honest portrayal of a soul's journey is why art matters, and that can be accomplished by anyone.

Clarifying Your Intent



With a road map in hand, a tank full of gas, a clear destination and schedule, you can now return to the task of refining your creative project to make the work sing for you and your audiences. For most of us, creative refinement means working back into your initial drafts with the most direct of all questions, "What does that mean?" This can be applied at the overview level to the whole piece, to each paragraph, to each sentence, and down to every single word and punctuation. If you assessed your resources appropriately, then you know that for the project you are attempting, you may be willing to force the issue to the granular level, or you may know that you have to fix the most obvious issues where the "what does that mean?" question is glaringly unresolved.

Usually this means you may go through both an additive and a subtractive process. You may need to add language to clarify meaning, deepen context, bridge concepts, and focus attention. But as likely as not, you will see that certain things you have said mean the same as things you already said, and you can subtract.

Writers use several tricks to assist them in this clarification process, most of which would fall under the banner of stylistic preference. For the way they want to communicate meaning, they make choices that they feel – and they have received positive feedback affirming that feeling – will bring pleasure to their readers.

There are also numerous ways to slice the discussion of stylistic awareness, but again we will focus on three that I have found the most useful and practical for consideration by new writers.

Simplicity and Elegance and Respecting Your Audiences

> *Simplicity is about subtracting the obvious, and adding the meaningful.*
>
> John Maeda

When you read the quote above, what comes to mind? This is a formula. Simplicity = (-Obvious) + (Meaningful). Makes sense, right? Why? In ten words?! Such a big concept! It works because implicit in your read of that formula is that Obvious

probably means, in effect, “All the things that as human beings speaking in the same native tongue referencing the same cultural signifiers of reasonably the same educational, socio-economic background understand based on their prior experience of the use of a given word or phrase in context.” And Meaningful means something like, “That which an audience understands to have inherent value or usefulness that is often equated with original insight or clarification of concepts that adds significantly to our awareness about the human condition at some level.” His use of Adding and Subtracting are also somewhat loaded language; Obvious and Meaningful are not measurable substances, so how do you know you are subtracting something obvious or adding something meaningful?

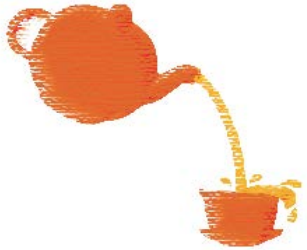
But John Maeda makes his point with his own little pithy quotable. Most folks that have made it this far in this book must share a large number of linguistic and cultural references to appreciate his quote. When we say something “in short,” we assume the reader can parse out of all the available meanings and latch onto a much more limited selection of meanings given the context. In this discussion, the Maeda quote can only mean one thing: keep it simple and trust your audience. Again, all that is implicit in that statement, I can trust you to figure out.

But simple is not so easy. Were it only so. It turns out that simple requires much thought. As I read a text, I ask, could any part of what I have just read, taken in context and imagining the most likely reception, be reduced? I subtract words, phrases, sentences, re-read, sometimes put words back in, sometimes add sentences, until I feel, with some degree of confidence, that this could not be said any simpler and have the same or greater clarity of meaning.

So why not reduce all to Zen Koans like this one:

Zen Monk Nan-in served tea to a professor. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!”



“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

Well, in fact, that’s not a bad story about listening with a clear and open mind. But meaning is always conditional. Without appreciation of Zen thinking, this story could be read as a cranky monk hassling some poor professor about stating the obvious.

It is safe to say that beginning writers often over-explain, and they can easily head in the direction of the Zen Koan simply by trusting their audience to construct most of the meaning by context.

Reducing Distance

As you return to your process of refinement, the focus becomes partly about enlivening the writing, show versus tell, but more generally about how you reduce the distance between you as the storyteller and any intended audiences.

Writing a summary of experience, an eyewitness account of some moment in time, there is a spectrum of distance from putting you into the event through the author's viewpoint or having you join the author in a distanced assessment after the fact. Either perspective works in an appropriate context; they are different genres of writing, but many people are unaware of how they are using their distance to keep the audience, and in a way themselves, separate from the emotional power inherent in having experienced the event. Let me provide an example from the day my father passed away.

> *Well, first of all, let me just say that I was seventeen at the time and I had finished high school that summer. My dad had smoked three-packs-a-day and had been trying to quit smoking for a couple of months. He was sixty-one and had a difficult life as a union organizer working in Texas and throughout the South. But we had gone on a vacation the month before and he seemed like he was doing okay.*
>
> *He came down from his bedroom saying that he had a terrible pain.*
>
> *We called the doctor. The doctor said that it was probably an ulcer attack. He had had several of those. We waited. He got much worse. We decided to rush him to the hospital. It was a heart attack. He died within a half-hour. My mom was hysterical.*
>
> *It was a night I will always remember.*

In this piece of writing, I have put myself in the natural voice of someone asked to recount a meaningful event, an event that they may have spoken about hundreds of times. Of course there are emotional issues, but in this example I am writing as if I want to put those issues well behind me. Again, in a fictional portrayal, that coolness might be a indication of character. But for those of us working on landing into our emotions, being still enough to feel the full power of the emotional shadow that certain events cast upon our lives, we want to see how our writing voice is protecting us from facing our pain. We may still prefer that neutral voice as we consider a public with our writing, particularly if we are asked to perform the writing. But for our own personal work, perhaps we would find it useful to understand what the use

of past tense verbs, lack of specific details, working around the moments of deepest trauma, represent as emotional distancing.

Here is an alternative viewpoint.

> *I will never forget the sound of my mom's voice when the doctor said, "George is dead."*
>
> *"God No! No! No!"*
>
> *A scream. A release. An explosion.*
>
> *The sound of her wail bounced off all the walls of the emergency room at Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, bounced down the streets and through the trees, bounced out into the night sky, all the way across the universe of my young mind.*
>
> *In a single moment, a single pronouncement, everything changed for my mom. It divided her life in two, and it taught me that love can reach down into the cellular essence of awareness, and with its rupture, tear a human being in half.*

In this case, I have put myself down into the crux of the trauma, that exact moment when the doctor told my mother that my father had passed. The trauma sits around the whole event, undoubtedly, but the reduction to this experience makes me return into the moment in my own head, in my heart, and generate a more heated closeness. That closeness also awakens in the reader a descent to their heart Chakra, to feeling the author's loss, not as an abstract, but as a tangible feeling shared between author and reader. This is the essence of the storytelling magic: that the distance between two hearts, two souls, is reduced to near zero, at which point compassion awakens.

Shaping Your Message

In line with our ascendant perspective of awareness as it relates to our bodies, at this point in a creative process you move from the heart to the voice. The voice here suggests that you are beginning to test your writing in the way a playwright arranges for a staged reading of a play. You want to speak out the words to hear how they echo around a real audience. You want to bring your friends over for a show or

recital at the house. You want to have the first private screening of the film. This decision, to test your work in public, to allow the truth you have attempted to capture in an artifact, is a critical part of the creative process. Because the first time your story speaks itself, a whole new awareness is possible.

What the Body Tells Us

When you first share a story, the most common surprise is that words that you have written have an entirely different power when they are spoken. Something you hear in your head as banal and emotionless suddenly is stuck in your throat as you speak the words. Your emotions bubble up. This happens whether or not you have an audience, but since most of us do not read our words out loud to ourselves (although we should as a practice), we have no idea that they are resonant in our bodies.

As such we learn in this first speaking that beneath certain phrases, certain moments, certain ideas, are channels back to the volcano of our suffering. The ability to notice these moments and how they are held in our bodies is the best reason to pass through this stage in a creative process. Many people let their writing stay on the page, away from an audience, away from a public sharing and listening, but they are missing this extraordinary additional way of learning about the text. Inevitably, the text will want to be re-written to some degree just because these moments are likely rich with additional insight. "Oh," you say, "when I wrote that my aunt touched my hand, I had not realized how much pathos was in that second, that moment. I should explore what else I was aware of in my soul right then; what were the echoes back to my own fears, my own emotions, that this moment represents?"

You can see how this process could work, where a story could turn itself inside out just because of a first reading.

Return to Purpose

If the audience is allowed to respond to your writing, they will likely ask "why" questions. Why did you choose this or that scene? Why were you concerned about the detail about the light falling through the window?

These questions turn you back to original questions of purpose, which you as a creative may have left far behind in your process. Why are you sharing this story, this artwork, this film, with us as an audience?

You may not have an answer. "It felt like it needed saying," is a good answer, but your own awareness suggests that you know more about the story and its reason for being. What you need not do is share your thoughts with this first audience, but you can taken their questions as a provocation to additional layers of

work about purpose, and those layers can assist your refinement process.

A story might have started as an unconscious act, but as it surfaces in the world it becomes a representative of your consciousness. It speaks for you. This is why many people fear completion and many creative projects dissipate right at this stage of first sharing.

A seasoned conceptual artist learns to live with the unknowing of this experience, implicit in the idea of conceptual art is a sourcing of unconscious material, for which the conscious mind has no explanation. Why bother explaining? As my old friend Terry Allen said, “Talking about Art is Like French Kissing on the Telephone.”

But for many of us, the process of letting go of the artifact includes a desire to more deeply understand why the story needed to be told in the first place. We actually want to answer the question, not because we think we should, but because we believe we might learn something in the attempt. Unpacking the reasons for having conceived the writing is challenging. The perspective giving process of reflection on purpose at this stage of creativity should service the continued exploration of the product, and if we can return to a core idea of why we think the story needed to be told, we often can return to the work and see if that purpose is being served by every part, every word in the story.

Edit to Message

Now the time has come for the final refined edit. In our workshop model, this last push through the text is always about message and point of view. A given artifact cannot do everything it is finite product. In making decisions about what stays and what goes, the only way to maintain focus is by returning to the best understanding you have about what you think the essence of the message is coming out of the story. Is it really a story about a mother’s death, about missing a lost soul and how her narrative shaped you, or is it more of a story about your own resilience, how you have learned to carry death, to face it, to move through some of your own fears of mortality? The shade between one or the other is minimal, but having a strong hunch that one is more informing the text than the other means that you can leave the parts of the story that do not serve that purpose behind.

Clarity about the core premise also has the advantage of reminding you that there are other versions of the story. You could take the same material and change the purpose and have that story service another part of the process of your life. We tend to forget this simple idea in creative work: that we can use the essential material of our lives in innumerable ways, serving reflections and awareness about countless issues. One story is just that: a small token of the endless complexity of living. Keeping that perspective helps you to let go.

Sharing Your Insight

As a producer, I always loved dress rehearsals more than opening nights. Opening nights felt like admissions of defeat. You had to admit no more could be done to improve the work. The critics could have at it.

Of course all shows change and evolve over the course of a run. No work has to be finished. There can always be more editions of a text, as long as the author wants to work the material.

But, assuming you have other stories to tell, there is a point of first separation as you present your product as the best you have to offer at the moment. The act of this release allows some significant additional learning. You now have a first perspective of the product as a whole and the product as an entity that now is being re-worked by the audience that is consuming it into their own version of your story.

The Integrated Whole

I always stood at the back of my theater to watch opening night. In truth, I was trying to take in the whole story of the experience, not the play itself. I listened to the audience listening. After years of producing, I knew with some certainty, sometimes within the first minutes of a performance, if the work was going to sustain an audience. If I knew we had made it, I would tiptoe down the back stairs and out of the theater. I would stand outside and let out a whoop, or an expiration of relief of some kind or another, and then tiptoe back in to watch the rest of the proceedings.

What I listened and watched for most closely was how the audience descended into the story; were they hooked or were they remaining aloof, trying to categorize the experience from a distance? Audiences have complex psychologies; what makes one work and not work can be totally random – small breaks in concentration in a scene, and they get away, and if there is not something to bring them back (as movie directors and producers know extremely well from test marketing their films) then you can lose the whole audience in a cascading effect as first one audience member yawns, and the yawns become contagious. Suddenly the experience moved from engaging to boring, with a single slip up.

With any luck, you will have enormously generous and giving reception for your product, and the expectations of a pricey ticket and a minimal level of entertainment value will not lead them to snap judgments.

As writers, or folks that present in a singular relationship from writer to reader, we are not as fortunate to have a way to observe our audience experience. If we have done our job well, the audience is not aware that it is working at all and the story has swept them away. We can, however, in presenting the work as a finished product, take our own overview to the piece and assess our emotional and intellectual relationship to it.

In the Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling, our main concern in observation of the work toward the end of the process is how each part of the product feels like it has an organic relationship to the other parts. Does the story flow? Does the story feel as if the rhythm of the way the words were expressed, the images were shared, allowed for the audience to breathe, to find their place, to absorb the messages explicit and implicit in the writing; and if as a digital story, the images, music, titles, etc.?

You may have very distinct perspectives about what works from all types of audiences. The awareness that comes from seeing the multiple ways a creative product can be understood and misunderstood by people is also critical to the creative process.

The changes that happen at this point can be as dramatic as a whole revision or continued tweaks. Or you can wash your hands of this story and move on.

Evaluating Your Effort

The final level of work on a creative process is to go back and understand the narrative of your narrative making. You have gifted the story to the world – so what did you learn?

Here are some useful questions for examining your creative process growing out of the Seven Stages construct.

How was the process of germinating the original idea? Was this story useful to work through at this moment in your life?

Did you feel that the shape and structure of the story or project was clear from the start? How did it evolve? What did this tell you about your relationship to the material?

How were you able to manage the resources you allowed yourself for the project? Was the project more or less complicated to achieve than you expected? What did you learn about yourself in managing the process?

In your initial revision, were you aware of your emotional relationship to the material? How did it change as you worked through the material? Were there particular moments of surprise in testing the material against your own expectation of honesty and depth?

As you vocalized the story for the first time, or shared your story with others, how did the story change? What did those changes tell you about your relationship to the text or product?

What did it feel like to release the story to a broader audience? Did it have the impact you envisioned?

How would you describe the positive effects of your process of creation on your well-being?

What challenges do you feel you will address as a result of working through this project?

All creative work is a learning process, and processing your process is more important than processing your product because the very act of creativity is a statement that you have agency in the world, to turn and idea into an action, and an action into an artifact. Humans' being is manifest through our creativity.

Questions

1. *Creative process is naturally chaotic, but here it is presented as steps along a path. What has been your experience of evolving a creative work, both to your satisfaction and to the satisfaction of audiences? How did you move from initial idea to the first stages of creation? What changed in your process as you attempted to refine and conclude your process?*

2. *Intimate writing, writing about uncomfortable issues, is usually assigned to the journal and diary. But around the world people are blogging, Facebook and Twitter posting about all numbers of intimate issues for feedback, support, and, at times, celebrity. In this moment, what is private and processable, and what is public and disclosable, that is merging? How has your creative process been altered by these changes?*

3. *There is always learning about the self in creative work, about one's state of mind in each step along the process, about how well one performs with or away from deadlines, about the sense of play and joy or toil and struggle that creative work causes you. Discuss some of the lessons you have learned in your creative process.*

Prompt 1 - Finding Permission

Tell a story about a time when you were given permission to express yourself through your own creativity. Bring us to the moment of awareness that you felt supported to fully explore your creative voice.

Prompt 2 - Making Lemonade

Write a story about a creative process gone wrong: a meal, a hobby or craft project, a community campaign, an event or production.

Try to take us to the moment of realization that things didn't quite turn out as planned.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Seven Stages of a Story

"We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning. The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them, to pause and hear silence, to name them, and then to become the storyteller."

Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*

Once upon a time, there was a young man who knew he was born in the wrong place. His heart belonged to the bohemian left in a cosmopolitan city, his body was stuck in Dallas. The misery of his childhood was made bearable by the siren songs of somewhere else, a place where the thoughts he thought would be normal. At eighteen, he left home for California. His goal: to learn about West Coast culture and politics...and to grow up. On arrival he had many adventures, many tests, many trials. After a glorious few years, he came back to Texas to set up shop as an activist-organizer in Houston. He got married. He reclaimed an interest in theater. But the story turned back to California, where he finished school and took his connection to theater to his first job. His activism was now mainly cultural. For a decade he held down a theater venue with inspiration and toil, stirring moments of triumph and numerous descents into crisis and turbulence. He stopped following, he started leading. He got divorced. He found a spiritual voice. He discovered the play of technology for work. He discovered the new media as it was invented. He married again. Had two children. With his new wife and friends he helped people tell stories in a new way. The story continued.

He finally came home...to himself.

Do you see your life as a novel? A play? A movie? Does the bio-pic that is you ever play before your mind in the soft light of an arty romance or in the grit and grime of hard edged drama? Part of being a storyteller is the sense that drama and comedy are all around you. This moment, you sitting reading a book, you considering your life – perhaps this scene is in that movie. The camera pulls into your face, you shake your head and say out loud, "Really...I have to make some changes. I am finally going to..." Fade to Black, and Fade In to the next scene, where something has changed in your life. You are called to a new story.

In this chapter we are going to look at the "long form" narrative structure as a source of inspiration for our work in story. Even if one never attempts a long form narrative project, the thinking about the way certain kinds of plots work, and why theories of dramatic structure are important to human storytelling, can assist us with even the shortest narrative. This territory is familiar to almost everyone these days through the popularization of the Hero's Journey. Also known as the monomyth of mythologist and Jungian-

influenced theorist Joseph Campbell, these theories inform, directly or in willful refection, virtually every film you see, countless plays, and many novels.

The goal is to re-interpret Campbell and other mythologist perspectives through the lens of the emergent seven stages.

The Story of Storytelling

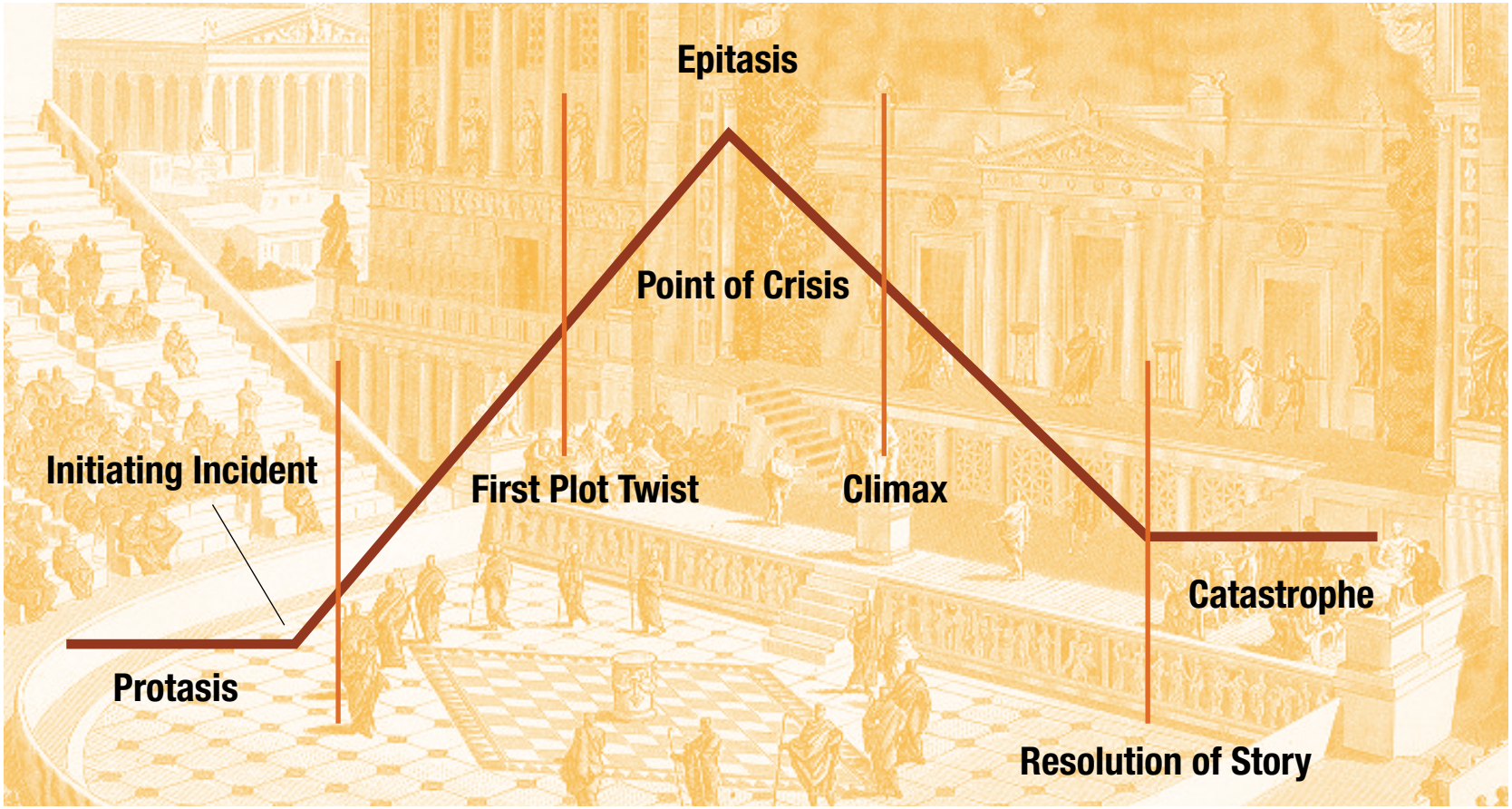
My journey into the way stories are constructed goes back to my days at the University of California in Berkeley as a student of dramatic literature. I ate, drank and slept the thinking about how the play is constructed. What stayed with me is how much our lives always reflected the basic idea of narrative theory. You try something new, you screw up, make friends, a few enemies, you get what you wanted, or perhaps what you deserved, but either way, you arrive at a new perspective.

Since the times of the Greeks, narrative has been analyzed in structural terms. Stories that audiences consistently enjoyed begin a certain way, the business in the middle tended to work a certain way, and they ended either happily or sadly. The idea of a dramatic arc was the simplest reduction. The desire of a character led to the action of the character in the world, led to the character arriving at a new place in their life, with fresh insight about themselves and about life in general. A comedy meant they got what they wanted; a tragedy meant they did not, and usually they ended up dead.

Aristotle in Poetics described the three parts of the play, later labeled by Horace and other Romans, as the protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe. Protasis establishes the character in context, exposition, and sets them on a mission, the initiating incident. The epitasis is the main action of the character(s). The catastrophe is summing up at the end – usually the work of the chorus, as all of the characters might be dead on the ground.

As we all remember from third grade, the central idea was that stories that hold our attention need to have a central character working toward something with enough obstacles that the conflict between that character and obstacles to the goal creates tension. No tension equals no attention.

In deep human history, theater started as a religious ceremony: the recounting of the life of a dead chief at a funeral. Masks were worn to represent the chief, and there was a final swansong re-production of his life. I am certain that the first priest or priestesses given this task in human history did not take long to realize that the categorization of achievement was not working as performance. He did this, he did that, then he did this, and then that...snoring in the background. Quickly, it occurred to them that even if



the life was relatively uneventful, why not spice it up? Legends were born. And the legendary hero always had dragons to slay.

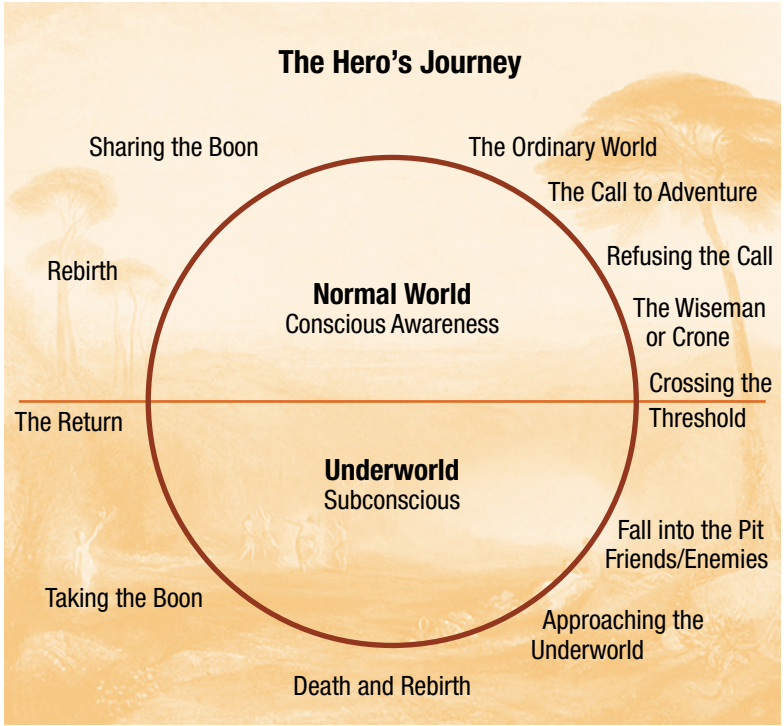
But it was not only about entertainment value. The fictionalization and mythologization of a life, even our lives, carries additional truths from the categorization of events. Whatever choices we had, whatever turned out as hoped and expected – the success we had to celebrate – we also had the mucking through of losses, struggles, burdens: the parts we see as failure. And as we all know, failure always has more

to teach us. So while the mythic amplifies success as the life of the legendary hero, it succeeds as it makes dragons out of the shit.

The Making of the Narrative Archetype

> *The mark of an immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of a mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.*
>
> Wilhelm Stekel

By the time of the great refinements of oral traditions into texts and formal theater by the Greeks and others, perhaps as much as 30,000 years of human linguistic tradition was informing their process. The multiplicity of ways of telling stories had already been reduced to the innumerable tried and true. As James Frazier and other mythologists showed us in the late 19th Century, these patterns were reasonably recognizable across cultures and throughout history – not just plot, but the cast of characters, the contexts and situations, the meanings. In the great quest of the social sciences at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Century to categorize human experience as somehow decipherable and general laws and systems of understanding of behaviors – to do what science had done to the rest of the natural world – it was inevitable that the social, anthropological and the psychological would intersect in the understanding of myth.



Joseph Campbell was first a literary scholar, tracking the Grail legends in literature as a student at Columbia University. By the mid-1920s he had been initiated to Europe's intellectual trends in literature and art; by the early 1930s to populist American literature (living in Monterey, California as a friend of John Steinbeck). But we think of Campbell as becoming a major 20th Century character as he began to integrate his broad interest in psychology with his interest in Indian culture – Jung meets the Upanishads. In writing *The*

Hero With a Thousand Faces in 1949, Campbell was presenting a popular way to engage with all of the discussions of human experience: the social sciences, the arts, history, and religion. Mythology became a way to think about story as the DNA of culture at precisely the time Crick and Watson were making sense of DNA.

The Hero's Journey Archetype grew out of The Hero With a Thousand Faces, suggesting that the formal pattern of central legends in many cultures could be viewed as metaphors for the life journey. Stories built around the near death and return experience of course mean something to us mortals. All of us will face the crisis of loss, if not the challenge of near death, and preparing ourselves for these challenges means that we will happily accept a diet of hair-raising adventure and nail-biting suspense to teach us ways to face these challenges with courage and optimism or stoic acceptance.

At a deeper level, the archetype, as Campbell following Jung suggests, touches upon a collective knowing about the stages of a life journey, particularly the separation narrative of child from family, of individual in relationship to community.

It is not necessary in this context to walk you through the details of the structure; Star Wars, Lawrence of Arabia, Avatar, and Titanic, numerous of the most successful blockbuster films of all time, demonstrate the structure effectively. You can also see it in the life narratives of Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, the Homeric Legends, the Arthurian Tails, and traditional and indigenous hero legends of all kinds. But the critique of the Monomyth, as the Hero's Journey is now referred, is precisely that it has this masculine orientation. It is not that there are not women heroes but that the stakes of their behavior and the sense of "conquest" rather than "acceptance" over death and our darkest fears, of battling darkness rather than embracing and overcoming it, suggests the Monomyth is more of a HisStory than a universal one.

The Feminine Alternative

Once upon a time lived a poor woodcutter, with his wife and daughter in a small cabin on the edge of deep woods. A bright spring day, as he was cutting wood and his wife was gathering berries and herbs, the devil appeared before them. "If you want your lives, you must heed my demand." "What must we do?" they asked, shivering. "I want what is standing behind your home, blossoming and lovely." The woodcutter had a single apple tree behind his house and felt himself lucky that the devil wanted no more. "Of course, you may have it," he blurted out. But as they returned to the house, to their horror they found their daughter standing behind the house, dressed in white, gathering apples. The devil had tricked them. The devil walked up to the young woman, but the purity of her soul

burned the devils hands. He screamed, "Woodcutter, I will take your lives, and the life of your daughter, and all that you have if you do not chop off her hands so that I can take her." The woodcutter was caught in terror, but his daughter insisted, "Please save yourselves." She offered up her hands, and the woodcutter struck.

The devil went to grab her again, but her tears burned him. Thwarted, he left them there to suffer.

The daughter, now unable to work, unable to make herself useful, decided the next fall to leave her family and journey into the woods. She walked for weeks and weeks until she was frail and nearly dead. One day, the King of the land came to these woods on a hunt and he passed by a meadow. He saw the beautiful maid without hands walking through the mist on the land, and wondered if she was an apparition. "Are you real?" He asked. "Yes," she answered. And in that instant, he fell in love.

He brought her to his castle and made her his Queen. And fashioned silver hands for her to wear to help her hide her shame. She grew happy, and together they had a child. All was well, but the storm of war came to the land and the King was called to battle. He left for months.

Soon the devil arrived and, seeing her happiness, he posed as courier and told the Queen that the King had fallen in battle in a faraway land. In grief she and the child left immediately, but it had been a ruse. She now was again lost and without hope. Eventually she found a place where she was taken in by a group of wild women in the forest. They cared for her and her child, despite all she had. She and her child grew healthy, and, by some miracle, her severed hands returned bit by bit over months and years.

The King returned, learned of how both he and his love had been tragically tricked, and sent messengers all around the land to find her. One messenger came back, again fooled by the devil, and told him that his Queen and child were gone and would not return. The poor King left his palace and began a search that lasted for three years, forgetting all else. He began to waste away, and in time he looked more like a beggar than like the King. Just as his strength was about to give, he wandered into the village where his wife and child were staying.

He proclaimed himself, and the family was at last back together.

The story, greatly shortened here, comes from *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Estes, and suggests an alternative archetype perhaps more suited to another way at looking at story. Instead of the wizened elder providing you with a "call", perhaps your initiating incident is a personal tragedy not of your doing – a fundamental rupture of your innocence,

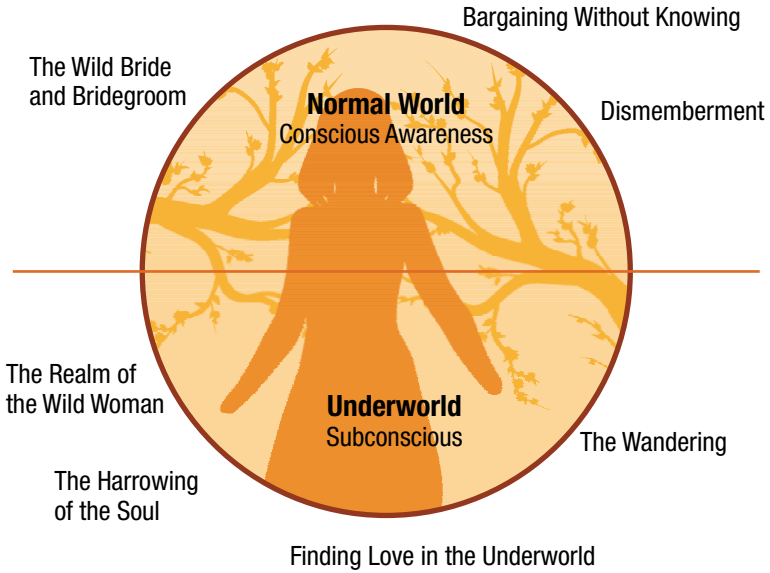
perhaps under the awareness or complicity, conscious or not, of your caretakers.

Your wounded character is then forced to face the elements. You become wild, you become shadow. And while you may find happiness in mating, in becoming a parent, the demands upon your mate, and your life, soon leave you once again adrift. Until you find a way to heal, by accepting the crazy wisdom – the well-earned perspective – of elder women who know your story well, you cannot find true happiness.

One could argue that Estes' use of the Handless Maiden tale as a alternative monomyth suits a more realistic world where the journey from the ordinary world is not simply a "call" but a unexpected "rupture." Being cast out is not necessarily to launch a quest, but simply to escape and drift. Perhaps the metaphor of overcoming the weight of unconscious fear is not a conquest in the darkness of the underworld, but a healing in the darkness – perhaps even a healing with the darkness – accompanied by the sorcery of elders that have lived through their own traumas. In both cases, the "boon" of new insight serves a larger knowing for community, but in the feminine archetype, it is more acceptance than mastery over that which is most feared.

This is not a choice between one or another, but rather a useful comparison of the thinking about narrative archetypes that can inform our process as writers.

The Handless Maiden



Dear Grandma

Matt MacArthur

Play Movie

Even in the short form of a digital story, we can see the story of a full life lived. Matt paints the picture of his grandmother's journey from daughter of immigrants, to teacher to principal, to community leader. He treats the journey as his own, as he assesses the boyhood memory of his attendance at his grandmother's funeral, with his emergent awareness of her role and inspiration for him as now father and historian.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. The image of his grandmother, feet up, with book in hand, resting in the teacher's lounge, is a poster for the life of an educator. We take from Matt's description an appreciation of the struggles of holding together a public school in a disadvantaged community. What ways does his presentation of challenges make us appreciate the closing moment of recognition of his grandmother's support within the community?

2. Many of us have grandmother stories, of surprise about their youthful antics, appreciation of their struggles, our benefit from their wisdom, kindness and love. Why is the telling of the story of the memorial story of someone who lived a full life important to our understanding our own journey through life?

3. The frame of the story, from one memory of a funeral by a 12 year old, to another memory by the adult, suggest we share stories again and again to compare our process of meaning creation. What ways does the re-telling of the same story take us on our own journey of evolving awareness?

Crossing the River – The Seven Stages Approach

At the river's edge
You look in
Imagining a life
Of river watching
Of counting fireflies
And you step down into the mud
And push yourself
Into the current.
And there is no more
Observing
This time you are
Becoming the current
Sure swift strokes
Carry you to the center
And you stop to float
As you drift
You remember beginnings
And the thoughts diminish
It's you and the water
Dissolving and flowing
Out to a distant sea
And a cloud drifts by
With the first Spring rain

A Prayer for Joe Carson, Joe Lambert

Of all the metaphors for facing life's largest challenges, as well as facing the challenge of dying, I have always been drawn to the river. The idea of the graphic below came to me out of a dream one night, as I was in the middle of the first webinar sessions. The year before, I had been reading an Irish hospice doctor's accounts of working with hospice patients through story. One of his visualizations was the release into the body of water, dropping into the River Styx, from the edge of a boat, sometimes accompanied, sometimes alone.

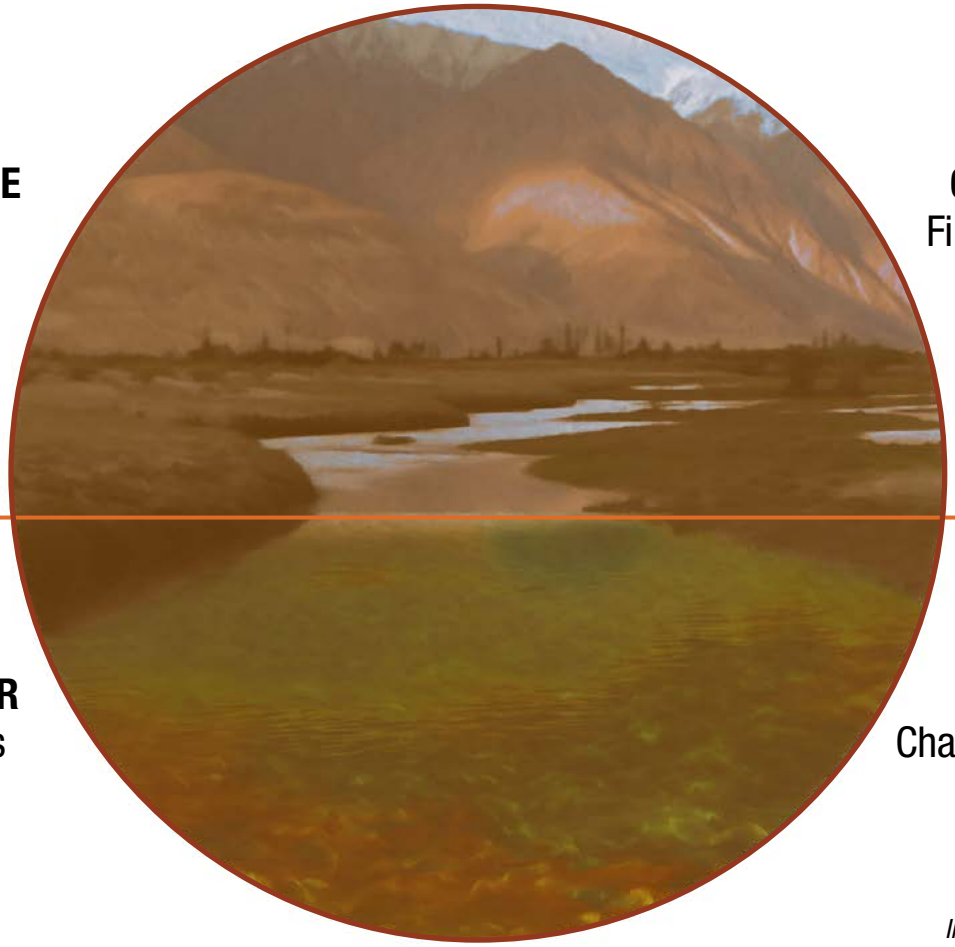
From that point I am sure I saw the river as the appropriate metaphor for the underworld, for the darkness in one's soul, as the place to explore the ruins of what fear and pain and sadness had done to you. The river was a location inside you where all those fears live. But it was also the bio-chemical soup you were given as a birthright – the stuff that lubricates your psyche, that makes it easier or harder to feel whole.

And this image became a different series of metaphors than suggested by the Campbellian hero entering the underworld or the feminized wounded maiden driven to the forest. The journey narrative remains a descent into that which is feared or evil or debilitating, but the image of crossing down and through a body of water holds onto the baptismal optimism. Water is a healing force, but also a threat.

7. REBIRTH
New Self
Sharing the Boon with the World

1. REJOICE
Home

6. RESOLVE
Final Obstacles



2. REACT
Rupture

5. RECLAIM
Capturing the Boon

3. RECONSIDER
Allies/Enemies
First Test

4. REVISE
Challenge the Demon
Climatic Test

Image adapted from Ashutosh Garg, Fotopedia.org ©Creativecommons

We are both drowning and being reborn. And in as much as we are such creatures of water, evolving from fish to amphibian to mammal, and as human culture organizes our lives or histories adjacent to, or driven by, a water source or body of water, the symbol holds a fundamental pull as a narrative archetype. The river as symbol also corresponds with numerous cultural archetypal narratives, where approach to bodies of water becomes initiation, diving in, and setting sail to an all-encompassing transformation.

Rejoice

Appropriate to any stage, we begin in a stasis of the ordinary – that place where we assume that our equilibrium is achieved and stable. Many stories begin with the idyllic. The Wizard of Oz and Star Wars have Dorothy and Luke living in perhaps a boring, but reasonably stable, family farm. Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed all were creatures of their traditions – stable traditions that were rooted in histories that had settled at some point to a normal – before the revolutions that they led upended reality. Implicit even in stories where the "normal" seems less than something to celebrate or is extremely fleeting, like the scene just before someone is murdered in a mystery, is the idea that a normalcy, a healthier world, an equilibrium, is present. In our own stories, we are often moving from something that at our given evolutionary development was working at some level; it had constancy, a constancy that either you or someone before or with you had fought to attain. Even stories that seem chaotic in retrospect, a dysfunctional normal, are for us a known quality of being. Children born amid war and violence will tell stories of enjoying many aspects of their lives on a daily basis; they find places for safety and flourishing despite the existence of constant threat. There has to be some re-joicable narrative in any of our stories, even if we imagined, for the schism that initiates the archetype challenge to the normal, to have meaning. Lacking a sense of a desired equilibrium, learning through the journey that "there's no place like home" or that we have the power to "overcome the empire" has little meaning.

In our own stories, we predicate the "decisive moment" that initiates a change on what life was like before the change. The places where with families, loved ones, even perhaps in our imagination, where we rejoiced in brief moments of joy and peace. Whether we are forced to the river or we know we need to go jump in to invite change, we carry those images forward with us, and in sharing the stories' point of initiation, we need a glimpse of the re-joiceable in order to hold that promise through the narrative journey.

React

Just as we are celebrating those moments of normalcy, something draws us to the river. The river becomes all that there could be, that all that there might be, in our lives. In Campbell's hero archetype, the stability of home, of normal, is established as the comfort of the parental unit. The individual, the emerging ego, wants to know who they are and, like all adolescents, they challenge the presumptions of what has been presented to them as adequate. Dorothy imagines a more colorful and exciting world; Luke imagines a more heroic life that confronts fears rather than retreating from them. But this need not be about the journey out of adolescence and the familial womb. Whatever stasis we had achieved, at whatever point of our life, we always want to have more perspective, more experience to test that perspective, and many people either respond to those calls to wildness and new awareness or sink into themselves at some level. The lure of the river always invites us to test the water again.

For some it is to know what it would be like to challenge themselves directly in the moving current; for some it may be simply to stare at our reflection at the edge where the eddies suggest some change. We can come with innocence, or we can come with a more adventurous curiosity.

But once at the edge, anything can happen. In the monomyth, the story essentially initiates with meeting the devil or crone or wizard or mystic; a stranger enters our lives that invites us to change. Splash, we are in, and the sudden jolt of the rupture propels us forward and down in ways that we may have little expectation of, or conscious preparation for. In this model, it is always conceivable that we are self-aware of the need to jump in. Historically, unexplained events happen and you never know when duty or opportunity or crisis will call; as we have evolved our ability to decipher stories, even from a young age, we are very quickly conscious that we may decide to go toward change. Many contemporary stories have no wizard, and they work precisely because we expect the protagonist not to wait for their helper spirit, or for a rupture that they cannot avoid, to take action. They simply act, and express their own power, rather than a mythical expectation that a force beyond ourselves is guiding us to a new level of awareness or perspective.

Reconsider

What is the meaning of falling into the water? Of diving into the depths? Of being swept by the current? Do we really want to hold our breath that long?

In a long form narrative, the action initiates with the decision of the protagonist to take action, to join in the fight for justice or revenge, to move toward

someone or something they desire, to address an imbalance in the world that an event has now set before them. But in the Campbellian model, there is a moment, before the protagonist acts in a way that makes the story propel forward, where the hero stops to reconsider the decision. The refusal of the call is the moment of confusion before action. It is the moment where Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita falls to the floor of his chariot, paralyzed by doubt. It is a reconsideration of the decision made. Buyer's remorse.

In our shorter narrative forms, it is the hitch in the purely heroic idea of courage as making us decisive. The simple line, "I really did not want to make that choice," recurs in many digital stories as this expression of doubt. Most of us do not choose to act upon convictions or to explore the muddy and sticky depths easily. We wonder, a little or a great deal, if we have lost our minds. Wouldn't it be safer to just climb back on the bank, return to the safety of the known, and try to make peace with the seeming demons propelling us toward change? Doubt is the most profound energy, because action often poses risk that we are sacrificing one set of powerful values for a different, perhaps new and untested, set of values.

For Hamlet, the "undiscovered country" not just of the potential for death, but for the potential of becoming someone that we will no longer recognize or be recognized by others, makes us weary, "makes us bear the ills we have," rather than act.

So as your head sinks below the surface in the narrative, you are aware that the choice you made is no more than that – a choice – one which may to this point have seemed inevitable and necessary, but, at the deepest level, you are aware that with each stroke down, you are moving to a point of no return. These are the moments of deepest knowing for the character at the beginning of the story, and as this mirrors our lives, these are the moments where whatever resources we have had to this moment, we will be calling on all of them to help us enter the underworld.

In Campbell, as well as the example from Este's Handmaiden, this reconsideration is addressed also by the entry of new characters, of allies as well tricksters or shape-shifters and agents of what represents the antagonizing forces, perhaps enemies. Even as we move off the fence toward our decision, we may travel down into the stream deeper and in a more profound way as we suddenly recognize that a new set of people, and a new context, invites or retards our progress. For Dorothy, it is the three companions on the Yellow Brick Road; for Frodo, the formation of the fellowship; for Luke it's Han and a Wookie. While the refusal of the call and these first steps on the journey are clearly demarcated aspects of a narrative, in many ways the sense of doubt,

of fear, of confusion, carries throughout the entire journey until the formal confrontation with the heart of the issue: the supreme enemy. In the Tolkien Trilogy, Frodo and Sam's doubt never really subsides; they are in a constant sense of dread and indecision over the journey. They overcome setback after setback, as do all heroes, but to say they descend fearlessly is ridiculous, and any cartoon hero that bravely walks into danger seems irrelevant to most of us. Who knows, and who would want to know, someone so assured to face change, and perhaps death, with so little regard for what it yet might teach us?

The current may have already taken us far, but we remember the bank, the home, the normalcy, with fondness. It informs some of our choices; perhaps our allies remind us of home, like Dorothy's three allies, and give us a part of the knowing that we had with us at home that perhaps we had not fully realized was necessary for our confronting of demons. All of us can relate to the idea that friends in our crises sometimes shape shift before us; people we knew to be supportive but private now step out of themselves to assist us in ways that seem extraordinary. And we know that in the dance of change, people that we thought had our best interest at heart are astounded at the choice we have made and move from support to questioning, or even opposing us, for their own reasons. The narrative model shows us that our state of awareness is heightened around connection to others as we sink down into the darkness and head for the bottom. While we may have started with the re-consideration of career or romantic attachment, we are now re-considering all numbers of relationships, our very context of being, the deeper and farther down we go.

Revise

At the deepest depths of our work on self awareness, we find ourselves in an underworld of mud, muck, shit, and suffocating loss of light. We have reached the bottom of the river. The heroine now finds herself at the critical battle, where life and death are decided, where the force of one's effort to address a difficult issue has put you as close to pure crisis as you feel you can endure.

At this deepest point, your ability to call upon all that has prepared you for this moment is at its greatest; the learning from the darkness and isolation is the most profound. And snap, you succeed. You rescue yourself and those around you from the clutches of the monster, and take as first benefit a newly acquired sense of strength or love or power and a new way of seeing your life forward.

The long narrative requires a climactic moment of conquest over the enemy and their forces. In our short narratives, we may skip the story of the dark night of the soul and go from examples of the many

tests we faced directly to the journey upward and our use of the new vision. But many stories that have worked magic on my heart come from the sitting at the bottom. In the mud of it. Deep depression. Lost hope. Addiction. Fear. The battles as good as lost, and something – that spark of humanness that provides us with the core of our resiliency – allows us to simply re-frame, to revision, the options before us.

The action in a big story is the death of the enemy, but in psychic terms it is the shedding of the identity, an identity that no longer serves our soul's work. The revising of our lives, as seen through the lens of the heroic battle won, is the sharp corner of change. We cannot return, we cannot really go home, not as who we once were. All that will greet us as we emerge from the depths will have to negotiate this revised identity. This could mean we return as teachers, as guides; we have new vision that serves our historic kin and kind. But it could, as in Frodo's case, mean a fundamental shift in our ability to relate to our home; we may find ourselves on a voyage away from all that we know. And if part of the narrative is about overcoming the oppressions of home, finally working through the scars of trauma and loss, the new identity means providing a vision for a new way of being, a cycle-breaking re-definition of normal.

Pliny once said, "The depth of darkness to which you can descend and still live is an exact measure of the height to which you can aspire to reach." This re-visioning is a process of mining the confrontation with mortal fear and perhaps mortality itself for all that it might have to give you. With this vast new sense of awakening, the hero takes possession of the new identity. Even before they take back the specifics of a boon, of a symbolic representation of the renewed awareness, they are coming back to the surface more fully alive than before.

Reclaim

From the darkness of the depths, the hero emerges from the river's bottom with a new sense of ownership over their soul's destiny. The manifestations of that new self are only as useful as they are demonstrated by their behavior with others. The boon, a magic potion or sword or talisman or jewelry, is the symbol of that which has been captured in the struggle in the lower depth, that can assist the larger project of the heros serving others as partners, parents, community members, leaders. It represents any number of facets of knowing, from the newfound strength that a sword might represent, to the reclaimed wholeness of the maiden's re-grown hands, to the power of confidence in one's general resiliency that a potion or magic object entails.

Resiliency is a large theme in our work over the years, the ways in which certain survivors, who have done depth work or naturally came through a test

with sustained knowledge, are able to teach us the tools of self-care, mindfulness, abilities to recover and continually inhibit unhealthy behaviors. Each of the boons of their skill set become tools for all of the people around them. The tools may not work magic – those they are connected to have their own heroic journeys to attend – but they serve to make the world around them that much more healthy, that much more safe, peaceful and filled with joy.

Resolve

Back in the discussions of the life stages or ways of knowing through evolving consciousness, the stage next to the last both represented a point in our narratives where we achieve a deeper level of wisdom; we have perspective on even the ways all perspectives are temporary and conditional. In the Hero's Journey, the next to final stage is the chase scene, or the final attempt of the forces arrayed against the hero to pull them back to the underworld.

What is suggested in many masculine and feminine narrative archetypes is that the central characters are never done, the end of one journey portends the next. The enemy's forces are set back, but not permanently defeated, and the resolve to vigilance and more and more complex ways of sustainability protecting oneself from the demons without, but also within, are in play in this final chase.

In our metaphoric reading, as with elders that find themselves increasingly cynical or hard-set in their perspectives, there is always a chance that the boon of great knowledge of a given journey becomes a trap. Certainty in one's knowing, particularly if the knowing leads people to bitterness or feelings of deep regret, and can leave people constantly drifting back down into the pits of darkness.

In most wisdom traditions, you achieve elder status on the level of awareness and consciousness when you accept the conditional nature of thought itself. You understand that your perspectives, your values, your ideologies, are simply constructs. There is relief and balance in this knowing; it makes the complexity of life more understandable. There are not singular answers, but many paths, many stories, each with a piece of a grand puzzle. This is similar to the inter-individual stage in the Kegan model.

In the Hero's Journey, a final turning back of the foe that tried to drag you back down also usually suggests acceptance of your own weakness and vulnerability. In many narratives, some ally that had made the journey to the depth and back with you, or perhaps some part of your character, dies in this last struggle. Or some ally that you trusted along the entire journey turns out to be a shape-shifter or trickster now set against you, and you must defeat or neutralize them to complete your journey. As the

various pieces of your newly constructed identity are tested, are given a shaking out, you may find some around you preferred you as you were. They may turn on you and confront the new identity. Like gang members who reject the ways of their gang after one too many tragedies or challenges, your compatriot gang members would prefer you dead than outside the family. Change can also mean rejection, and having the resolve to not let that opposition defeat your new identity is suggested by this narrative turn.

In tragedy, the central character dies. Their tragic flaw – Lear's arrogance, Hamlet's indecisiveness, Macbeth's paranoia – makes them less than fully able to use the boon of their journey in a way to save themselves. What is understood in the tragic form is that we as observers of the failed hero can resolve to address our own deficiencies in character. We also understand that we may or may not "win" in a journey; sometimes the journey is toward an inevitable ending, like a battle with terminal disease, but we may come to a deep sense of resolve that what we have gained from exploring the depths, although it has not freed us from all our suffering and brought us to a profound enlightened awareness, has honored ourselves somehow in the process.

Rebirth

At the end of the Hero's Journey, the main character returns home. Ulysses finds a new normal. The soul work done, character tested, resolve deepened to hold on to the boon of the journey, make the re-born hero a model of depth and resilience. Our sorrows and losses are no longer weights upon us, but badges of hard-won experience. The tales fill us with hope about our own ability to face and overcome our deepest fears and become a strong and wise leader, or at least a self-possessed, self-aware, balanced and healthy human.

The boon is now ready to be shared with your family, your community, the world. In telling and re-telling of the heroic deeds and achievements, all the audiences become a part of the hero's success. But as has been suggested in some narratives, as with poor wounded Frodo's inability to find comfort in Shire life, there may be no real return to home. The re-born soul has no place in their historical homeland. They may become sojourners or they may find that the home they have to attend is outside this life; they are now ready to be at home with the end of their story.

We love our resurrection narratives because every morning is a resurrection, every Monday, every Spring, every large turn in our lives. There are ways that we think of the return home as a deep knowing that we are secure in ourselves, that we have the tools to flourish and to help others around us to flourish.

Nowhere Anyhow

Darcy Alexandra

Play Movie

In a life story, there are many moments that can hold great meaning. Darcy explores a memory of a childhood encounter in a roadside diner. The moment holds a key to understanding the complex emotions of adoption, parenting, self-worth, ambition, socio-economic solidarity, loneliness, and vulnerability.

Reflections

As you listened to the story, consider the following questions in relation to the material presented.

1. The idea of the normal world, of a place of stasis, may not seem implicit in Darcy's story. Her father's judgment, "She could be your mother," heard in this context, suggests Darcy's childhood had many such moments of disruptive, at best unsettling, calling of attention to the fact of her adoption, of her birth mother being a "less than adequate" person. How do we understand home as a normative starting point when home is filled with ongoing moments of difficulty?

2. When we consider the arc of our lives, we often re-visit small moments to push us through the darkness of the depths. In Nowhere Anyhow, the adult Darcy recognizes the poignancy of her lingering desire to know the story of her birth mother, to recognize herself in someone else. Where would you place this story on the cycle of emergent knowing?

3. What is the boon in this story? What can we take as new awareness for ourselves, from Darcy's intimate reflection about her childhood?

Questions

1. *The Hero's Journey and Handless Maiden tales suggest that stories that have mattered in our culture require a fundamental test of one's ability to survive under stress, trauma, and life-threatening challenge. Why do you think these archtypes serve to expose something about our human condition?*

2. *Many people would argue that the life passage process of a formal rite of passage to allow people to move from adolescence to adulthood has disappeared in modern culture. They would suggest that both the risk-taking behaviors of youth culture and perhaps a lifetime of putting oneself in moderate to extreme risk are reflections that the lack of formal passage rites. In reflecting on your own life journey, how has the need for adventure driven you to take risks? Have the lessons been a boon, or a bust?*

3. *In the steps along the journey, the characters you meet become as important as the journey. The archtypes of sage, sidekick, trickster or shapeshifter, antagonist or shadow, may or may not speak to you as representatives of the travellers on your specific road. What are some of the other archtypal characters that you feel have been part of your journey?*

Prompt 1 – The Unexpected Call

Sooner or later something seems to call us onto a particular path...

This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am.

James Hillman

We all have moments when we have been called from our ordinary existence to wander into the lower world and explore the depths. Share a story of your call, where it took you, and what you learned.

Prompt 2 – Re-Surfacing the Gift

Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing. Use the pain as fuel, as a reminder of your strength.

August Wilson

Implicit in the return from the underworld is a sense of self that is capable of new insight. Sometimes that is a sense of understanding that which was not possible before. Share a story of a moment when you brought the boon of forgiveness back to share with someone in the world.

Try to take us to the moment of realization that things didn't quite turn out as planned.

ADDENDUM ONE

Writing Samples from the Seven Stages Webinars and Workshops

Chapter 1

Sarah Miller

I am ten and walking with my parents in the woods in Northwestern Ontario, in the cool, musky embrace of the Canadian Shield. My dad leading the way in the front, me, an only child, in the middle, and my mom following both of us.

We talk at times. Stop to eat snacks we packed. Sing songs. They use tricks to help keep me moving when my legs get tired. Say, "You be the leader now. And we'll follow."

But mostly there's quiet between us. Not silence. The crunching of our feet on the path. The wind in the leaves. Bird calls ricocheting across the space around us. But quiet between us. Quiet that allows me to get lost in thought. Or get lost in not thinking.

I pass the time playing a game with myself. It goes like this. I watch where my father puts his foot and try to step exactly in the spot where his foot has lifted, matching his stride, getting into the rhythm of his steps, trying not to falter or lose pace or bump into the back of his legs.

I'm here with someone, walking with someone, being with someone, without words.

Barbara Ganley

As I set out to take photos of marsh birds in the near dusk light, I notice my brother walking his meditation labyrinth, just there, between me and the sea, mindful step after focused breath. The old oak stretches its gnarled arms over him, squares and bits of blue sky and white cloud peeking through the leaves as they flutter and settle flutter and settle. I stop to watch the soft grass hold the shape of his feet. It is as though I have stepped into my brother's Buddhist dream.

Just as I am about to turn away, just as he nears the midpoint in his slow spiraling effort, he pauses. Something has shifted. And then just there: white downy feathers, incandescent with the slanted last light, one…two…three…four rocking like little glowing boats, floating like wispy pieces of cloud, down around his shoulders down to his feet. It's almost too perfect. Scripted. I almost laugh.

I look up.

Above us, above the feathers, neatly camouflaged by leaf and bark and light, a juvenile red-tailed hawk peers down from a low branch over a fierce curve of beak. At my brother. Who peers back. For a long moment. And longer. As though nothing else exists. Then in what looks like choreography, as one they turn away, my brother back to his meditation, the hawk to its gifting of feathers. As though it's the most natural thing in the world.

In this fluid stillness, in this crossing between worlds, between consciousnesses, I feel a blowing open of some inner self, just like that, the perhaps of reckoning or recognition as I witness a settling in together of bird and man, wild and wilder, for this one bright moment before dark.

Aurora Levins-Morales

I am a crow person, wicked eye, harsh voice, truth telling, absolute black, the prophet on the bleached branch beside the battlefield, everything reflected in the small bright retina, picking up twigs to build things with, head cocked to one side, listening, watching, collecting, crying out.

I am a carey person, the sea turtle, riding big currents that span oceans, feeling the tugs of tides and histories, the edges of continents. One being in a vast ocean, navigating.

I am a migratory thing. I am the wild geese who find their way not by landmarks, but by the subtle shift of magnetic fields inside their bodies, my own bones the needle of my compass, looking in to see out.

I am a flock of things. I am a hummingbird zipping from one blossom to the next, sipping and turning the bug filled sticky nectar into speed, into energy, into tiny thrumming heart.

Who doesn't smile to see them. I am a seed gatherer, a nut burying furred creature, planting against the frost, against the deep drifts of cold. I am a multitude, an ecosystem, a constellation scattered across your sky.

Chapter 2

Camilla Rogers

"Oh for God's sake, Michael," my mother scolded. "She's a girl!" she'd say with obvious exasperation.

Dad's way of hugging was a wrestling maneuver – his way of comfortably making contact that carried him from his college days awkwardly into fatherhood.

I loved it! I loved that he would grab me – reaching around me, full bodied, twisting his arms, twisting

mine – his funny grunts and my uncontrollable laughter entwined. It was "pretend rough."

My mother's plea to get him to stop or to do it differently embarrassed me. But it burned me mostly because I was afraid it would embarrass him – as it was designed to do – to get him to stop. To stop his awkward affection, and offer me instead only his sheepish smile.

For goodness sakes.

I may be a girl, but who cares? I'm his child.

Wendy Shapiro

When I was twenty-three I decided to take my first ballet lesson. Multiple times a week I would subject myself to impossible movements sometimes in sync with the sounds of the piano. Over my thirteen-year experience I learned that within the strict boundaries of controlled movement, rigid choreographed patterns, striving to produce beauty from my own body – there were near perfect moments when boundaries blurred and I was neither mind nor body. Guidance and inspiration from my teacher helped to create these moments. Now, many years later, I continue to seek these moments. Is it possible to find inspiration from within?

Diane Westwood

I like my body to be invisible, unseen, unnoticed. To just get on with the job – a transparent interface with the world. My body had been out for its regular exercise, three and a half miles at a brisk pace and feeling good. Showering, I remembered my body was there and paid attention to it – rare. We should be more familiar, my body and me. I find my way to a lump, left side – and a chasm of black that lasts a week. A week later it's not a problem. But a lump, left side, has shown me, briefly, how deep and how dark it can be.

Mahri Holt

I think a lot these days of when I was 12 years old, that brave girl who had so much to say and no one to listen.

I have these scars on the back on my head, hidden by my hair.

There are 5 there, and they act like touchstones sometimes when I am least thinking about it. I can feel my right hand reach for the ridge of the largest bump, like a cliff, or a mountain or a grave.

It's like I have my own Hayward fault where tectonic plates hit up against each other, and that edge is an invisible rift that runs through my life.

It is hard to explain why I was so far from home, a 12 year old traveling in a war zone. My neighbors were

photojournalists and I traveled with them for 3 months taking care of their daughter. It's a story I have waited decades to tell.

There were places that were very dangerous in Nicaragua and Guatemala and El Salvador in 1984. But even more important, and confusing, there were places more safe and welcoming than my own family back home.

I earned those scars one night when someone broke into the van and beat me unconscious while I lay sleeping across the front seats.

It is hard to explain how those wounds made me know how strong I was, and how I would survive, and how I belonged here in this world that requires so much blood.

Chapter 3

Sarah Miller

I am walking home from the strip mall on the corner of my street. The Chicken Delight is about as far as I'm allowed to travel on my own.

So I'm walking home, as there's nowhere else to go. I'm enjoying the sun and breeze on my skin, looking at my feet, careful as always not to step on the cracks, my nostrils full of the smell of this dusty prairie city in the early autumn, musty and sharp. Something makes me look up. A maple tree seed, that tiny helicopter, is falling, spinning, to the sidewalk. Twirling gracefully, in slow motion, it settles on the earth, fleeting and gorgeous. It is followed by another. And another.

Suddenly, and for just a moment, I am the maple seed. I am the clear blue sky filling the gaps between the branches and leaves. I am the sun, and I am the breeze.

This memory is the length of a small strip of sidewalk. But I say to myself I will always remember those maple seeds falling. And I do.

Peter Whitehouse

On a one-week retreat in the Rocky Mountains I have just spent one hour in an all red room in a red house. Everything was red from the candles to the floral decorators. The outside light came in through a circle red window. I was seeing red. The day before I stayed for sixty minutes in one all yellow and back the day before one all blue, and yes before that all green and initially one all white. I was at the Shambala Mountain Retreat learning the five colors of Tibetan Buddhist wisdom.

The idea was to meditate in environments that allowed one the opportunity to go deeper into various forms of wisdom. I cannot even quite remember the matches between the type of wisdom and color but they had

something to do with action in the world (blue), relationships to others (yellow) and passion (red). I remember white was the color of the Buddha him/her/itself. Frankly it seemed a bit contrived.

To get away from it all I took a walk up a trail that led to a lookout perhaps 1000 feet above the camp with its stupa, kitchens, classrooms and the tents in which I was staying. Amazingly as I looked out at the colorful scene in front of me these five colors if you count white as a color appeared to accept themselves in the mountains and valleys in front of me. Blue came from the sky and white also in the form of clouds. The trees were green as you might expect. The mountains had an interesting blend of reds and yellows that seem more salient and separated than I might have imagined seeing in other similar vistas.

For that moment I felt both the separation of the colors and their integration into the sublimity of nature. Is it wisdom to divide even wisdom itself? I resist it, but do we need separation to see togetherness?

Chapter 4

Janet Ferguson

He came to me through my grandfather who sat on the front porch and told stories as the day faded. Evening after evening the stories stitched themselves into the same tale over and over again. Looking back now they were different stories all held together by Brer Anansi, the spider. Brer Anancy, the trickster, the one who had survived the long ancestral journey across Atlantic, stowed in the hold, spinning survival stories, staying alive. Living by his wits, Brer Anancy convinced alligator to carry him 'cross the river on his back.

Brer Anancy talked himself into the biggest share of crisp fried plantains, Brer Anancy helped everybody by bearing the burden of their rest for them. For a while Brer Anancy was my hero, he turned the world inside and out and upside down. And as a child that made me laugh so hard. My grandfather shook his head, chuckled and tut-tutted while I sang along learning every little refrain that helped the trickster spin his spells. After difficult days sign posted by emotionally turbulent classrooms and school yards, the evening would come and Brer Anancy the trickster, the shape shifter would spin his web again and again and the world would come right for me, at least just for a little while.

Chapter 5

Susan Adele Huizenga

(from adelehouston.blogspot.com)

I have poems but none about my mother and me. It seems to be elusive as a subject; maybe because poems are not seen as having value by her. That should not be the measure but it is likely the impasse.

Gertrude is her given name. I know she dislikes it. My uncles and extended family call her Gertie. I always felt relieved to have no need to call Mom by her first name. It was not until I helped with various social welfare forms that her name now nearing eighty years owned was once again on my brow of awareness. Her hand shakes. I get to print her full name inclusive of the middle, Irene, and my father's name that she did not give up after giving up on her thirty-seven years of marriage with him.

I fill out descriptive forms with lists of ailments and meds and realize that my knowledge about my mom is awkward and very incomplete; yet I have no questions.

We are not close. I do try to attend to RESPONSIBILITIES in the manner of my father. Maybe I am too much like him. My relationship is within the shadows of my brothers who are nearby and nearer to her heart. She has told me, "Your brothers need me more than you do." I accept this without any out loud question.

When I was a teen I think she tried to live vicariously through my adolescent adventures. She remembers boys and names and dates much better than I. She had her favorites; they were not the same as mine.

While living with her as an adult and tending to the day to day of both of our overhead needs, I discovered Gertrude was a Saint – I attended a Church by that name wondering if it would bring me closer to my mom. It was an awkward stretch into an attempt for meaning, which did fail but I did find a Gertrude that connected with souls and words and that was a blessed thing.

A mother of many children will have many relationships and I am ok with mine. Maybe it is an oldest child thing. Upon reflection my core relations are similar to that with my Mom: important but distant. If there is a need I will be there. If there is an event I will attend. When it comes to family I do not find the locus of control within.

Chapter 6

Diane Westwood

We were twelve women who had come together in a community centre. We didn't know each other but we were all there, for a day, to learn how to make 'proggie' rugs. There's a history and tradition in mining communities for this kind of rug in my part of England. A tradition long gone. We were twelve women. And frames and tools and raw materials. And above all talk, lots of talk. And laughter. And food. We planned our rugs, touched fabrics, made decisions about form and colour and texture. At the end of the day we were twelve women. We'd come together to make rugs in this place of community.

Vanessa Lang

When I met Bob I didn't know a plant from a weed. He used to say, "there are landscapers and land scrapers." For years I was the scraper, pulling up scrubby things he'd pointed out as weeds and raking up debris behind him while he planted , pruned and developed the overall design.

Two years after he died, Bob's magnificent garden began to over-grow the house and I felt compelled to take action. Knowing only through osmosis, I gently removed each of Bob's overly ambitious shrubs and plants and tucked them into a temporary bed at the side of the yard. Even some trees had to be moved and I stood in the living room window , watching as a mechanical digger carried them one by precious one in its bucket. Such audacity, such betrayal.

Mahri Holt

Recently I saw a college boyfriend from long long ago.

It was lovely to see him, and wonder why I left him, and then to remember why.

I was driving blind between 15 and 30, moving fast, desperate to find what I wanted. I cycled through cities, schools, ideas, and most of all, people. Nothing fit. A quiet state of panic, spinning in isolation and self criticism, fueled by frozen grief and relentless ideals.

I glimpsed that girl - the 18 year old who studied philosophy and ancient Greek for 2 years before dropping out, and running off to Europe. It was so nice to see William and realize how familiar he felt, and hear how his life as a philosophy professor has evolved so naturally from who I knew when he was 20.

It suddenly shocked me - how did I know at 18 I didn't want to be a professors wife? It was a best case scenario for how I had been raised and what I was taught, so much better than what I came from. How did I know that the comfort of the familiar was not what I wanted, would never be enough for the person I hoped to become?

Where did I find that courage, to want something I couldn't quite imagine or name? This insight has made me rethink everything - all that young vast time of scarcity and desperation. I retrace the decisions I thought were thoughtless, the flight from Santa Fe to Chicago to New York to Seattle, and feel a secret longing underneath the restlessness. I longed to live my life in a creative way, with each step a leap off a cliff with wings unsteady, uncertain.

I had no assurance I would survive - in fact everyone told me I would not.

That blind courage and desperate hope have made everything I love now possible for me. That vision;

that life was a mystery and I might step outside the defenses of the known life, so small and static.

That I might learn to live – somehow, somewhere- in the unknown.

That girl.

I owe her everything.

ADDENDUM TWO

Approaches to Material in Education, Social Services and Community Arts Work

Education

In the original thinking about the use of this curriculum, I imagined this as a fifteen-week undergraduate semester course, where one week participants would explore the ideas of each chapter, and one week they would explore the creative writing coming out of the ideas. The structure suggests an exploration of ideas informs the writing, but it could as easily be that the writing informs a further discussion of ideas. As I have experienced in the two webinar series and the retreat, the discussions were grounded in the life stories of participants.

At the college level, the supplemental reading would include major selections out of the bibliography. Ideally, this would be presented in an interdisciplinary co-teaching context where you would mix instruction by a person familiar with educational and developmental psychology, with a person familiar with approaches to creative writing support and development. As was suggested in the introduction, the aim is not specifically to prepare students for success as creative writers, although one would hope the depth and quality of the writing would improve. The goal would be to provide participants with a synthesizing series of metaphors for the continued exploration of human development through the assessment of their own life experience. In this way, this course would be much more about life skills, reflective practice, and emotional well-being than about the advancement of a specific in-depth appreciation of the fields touched upon in each chapter.

I am also confident that the material can be easily brought into curriculum at the K-12 level. In working on the international webinars, and especially in presenting the material in a bi-lingual setting in a retreat in Spain, I was challenged to present aspects of the material with a degree of simplicity and clarity that would be approachable by middle school and high school participants. Seen from the simplified approach, this is a creative writing program that starts with the subject of nature, moves to the body, then attends to issues of growing up and maturity, ways of learning, ways of understanding self, approach to creativity and understanding the power of story in our lives. While one hopes for the interdisciplinary ideas to build upon each other, the seven stages may not be consciously understood as a scaffolding

process by participants. The goal may be no more than letting the students explore the various angles on writing about life experience, and thinking a bit about processes of emergence and change in their lives.

Social Services

In as much as this is meant as an exploration of identity and self-awareness, the most practical application for this work is in engaging people who are consciously working through issues of recovery and healing. The overall structure and the specific approach of the writing prompts are meant to encourage participants to address difficult issues or complex emotional territory in their lives. While it may be some time before this total process has an opportunity to be explored inside a clinical environment – as a supplement to a therapeutic expressive writing and creativity process, for example – aspects of the approach might find immediate value to professionals working in the context of social work, psychological and mental health support.

In our work in digital storytelling, as we have been presented opportunities for work with individuals who are survivors of trauma, we always insist in the direct support of social and psychological professionals. Creative processes can always unlock deep emotions, and those emotions may lead one back into crisis. Any engagement with a public that has self-defined as recovering and is using a process as a formal intervention also demands the awareness of a broad array of ethical concerns. Our Silence Speaks program has a great overview to those issues at http://silencespeaks.org/ethics/.

Community Arts and Digital Storytelling

The community arts movement has always informed my work. The issues of democratic access to cultural resources, the celebration of amateur and grassroots creativity, the relationship between cultural literacy and political agency, and the strengthening of community bonds and integrity of historical communities affected by large economic and social forces, all inform my and my immediate associates' work.

An ambition of the work going forward from the Center for Digital Storytelling, and my own work in media and education, is to provide an increasing number of mechanisms to train and develop community arts-based story facilitation professionals. There are countless practitioners associated with the Center for Digital Storytelling at this time for whom the principal challenge is working to find consistent methods for deepening and improving scripts used in digital stories. The Seven Stages suggest a refinement of prompts for potential stories, but also suggest an entrainment process for facilitators to become more deeply in touch with their own stories.

The practical application of this curriculum will find homes in many contexts. My hope is that you will join a community of practice associated with this curriculum, join a workshop or a webinar, and share your stories of using the material at sevenstagesbook.org.

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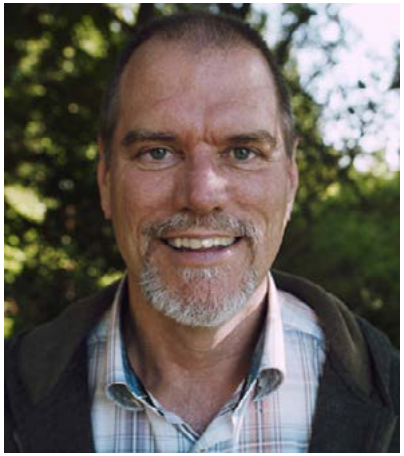
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joe Lambert founded the Center for Digital Storytelling (formerly the San Francisco Digital Media Center) in 1994, with wife Nina Mullen and colleague Dana Atchley. Together they developed a unique computer training and arts program that today is known as the Standard Digital Storytelling Workshop. This process grew out of Joe's long running collaboration with Dana on the solo theatrical multimedia work, Next Exit. Since then, Joe has traveled the world to spread the practice of digital storytelling and has authored and produced curricula in many contexts, including the *Digital Storytelling Cookbook*, the principle manual for the workshop process, and *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*.

Born and raised in Texas, Joe has been active in the Bay Area arts community for the last 25 years as an arts activist, producer, administrator, teacher, writer, and director. In 1986, he co-founded Life On The Water, a successful nonprofit production company that offered a broad array of programs serving San Francisco's diverse communities. Joe has produced over 500 shows, ranging from theatrical runs, single performances, special events, citywide festivals, subscription series, conferences, and digital story screenings. Prior to his career in the arts, Joe was trained as a community organizer and assisted in numerous local, statewide, and national public policy campaigns on issues of social justice and economic equity. He has a BA in Theater and Political Science from the University of California at Berkeley.