

or at least felt like one. I knew *one* other boy who read books outside of class, and he moved away in the seventh grade. I played baseball, did very well in school, attended the local Baptist church, hung around the house a lot and complained, incessantly, of being bored. Unlike most of his peers, my father was not gainfully employed in the steel mills. He chose to sell cars instead, and he was very good at it. But my mother saw little of the money once they divorced. She raised my two siblings and me on her earnings as a telephone operator. It was a good union job, and her wages kept us above the poverty line, but just barely.

Adults I knew growing up in Gary seemed to live what I have since heard called a *declension narrative*. They romanticized their youth, but they had little good to say about the adult years: Danny, enjoy yourself when you are young, because it is all down hill after that. They put in their time in the steel mills, cleaned house, mowed their lawns, raised their families, drank pretty hard. By the time they hit 25, they were reminiscing about the good old days. For me, the good days would have to be in the future, I imagined. From about eighth grade onwards, I expected that the good days would begin when I got to college.

I was right. I enrolled in Valparaiso University in the fall of 1972, having received an Indiana scholarship that paid my tuition for any in-state school I might attend. For my life story, leaving Gary and going to college (15 miles away) is *the* watershed event. I might as well have gone to live in Paris, or Oxford. I made lifelong friends in college. Within months of arriving at Valpo, I met the woman who would eventually become my wife. By the end of my freshman year, I was reading many of the authors who would shape my intellectual identity — Freud, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Buber, especially. These authors, among many others, are like characters in my life story. I imagine dialogues with them. A few years ago, I heard a scratchy BBC recording of Sigmund Freud, from the end of his life. He sounds so much better in my head.

My dual citizenship in the world of ideas is foreshadowed in my double major at Valparaiso University. I majored in Psychology and in the Humanities. But I resisted thinking hard about the distinction between the two during my undergraduate years. I developed an interest in psychology through courses I took in Christ College, which is the name of Valparaiso's honors program in humanities. It was in Christ College, not the Psychology Department, where I first encountered Freud. For one seminar taken during my freshman year, we read Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *De Anima*, Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, and Skinner's *Walden Two*. We discussed each author's

CHAPTER 6

A Psychologist without a Country Or Living Two Lives in the Same Story

Dan P. McAdams

Let me confess: I live a double life, split between empiricism and hermetics. I do so publicly, with little shame but more than a little awkwardness. It is awkward to explain to my scientific colleagues that I no longer “run subjects in labs” because I am too busy trying to understand what human lives mean. And it is awkward to explain to my humanist colleagues why I still insist on using statistical procedures to test hypotheses about the stories people live by. I would like to say that I am not bothered by the awkwardness, that I am comfortable moving back and forth between intellectual homes, that I have managed to rise above it all because I know, deep in my heart, that I am doing the right thing. But that would be a lie. The truth is this: I would love to live as a full-fledged patriot for both countries, loyal to their respective creeds and constitutions. But my dual citizenship never seems to achieve the comfortable fit for which I long. Nonetheless, my double life is not without its rewards. And I have even managed to make a story out of it.

From the steel mills to the Ivy League

The story is, in certain ways, embarrassingly trite. Poor boy rises from humble origins and makes good. Think Ben Franklin, Horatio Alger. Gary, Indiana in the 1960s had not yet experienced the precipitous loss of jobs in the steel industry that would eventually lay waste to its economy. But for a boy with intellectual inclinations and literary interests, Gary was a cultural wasteland,

understanding of the relationship between self and society. Of the four, Freud spoke most clearly to me, perhaps because of the beauty of his prose, translated so eloquently by James Strachey. The literary quality of Freud's works – the stories he told, the metaphors he used, the poetry of his arguments – this all appealed to me as much as did his ideas. (Indeed, Freud won the Goethe prize for literature toward the end of his career.) I am less Freudian now than I once was in my view of selves and society. But I still feel the thrill when I read his original words.

When I enrolled in Harvard's graduate program in Psychology and Social Relations in the fall of 1976, I foolishly believed that I would continue to spend time in seminars talking about Freud, self, and society. Instead, the first year of graduate school was mainly about research methodology, construct validity, measurement, statistics, and the arcane debates raging in the field of personality psychology at the time regarding the relative efficacy of personality traits and situational constraints in the prediction of human behavior over time and across situations.

But this was not as bad as it sounds. Inspired by my graduate mentors (David McClelland and George Goethals), I continued to read literature, philosophy, and social and personality theory, though I kept these books hidden in my backpack when I walked into the lab, and I threw myself into the world of research. I developed an objective coding system for analyzing short imaginative stories told by research subjects in response to ambiguous picture cues (a method called the Thematic Apperception Test, or TAT). I used the TAT to assess individual differences in a personality characteristic that I called *intimacy motivation* (McAdams, 1980).

The TAT was the brainchild of Henry A. Murray, a maverick Harvard psychologist who championed the scientific study of human lives in culture during a period (1930 to 1960) when American psychology was dominated by the behaviorists. I was too late to Harvard to know Murray in his prime, but I read assiduously his masterwork, *Explorations in Personality* (Murray, 1938), wherein he laid out an agenda for studying persons that seemed to me, in the late 1970s, to blend psychological science and the humanities. Murray argued for biographical methods in the study of lives. The stories people told about their lives might serve as raw data for scientific inquiry, he insisted. A similar message, but with a marked developmental slant, came from my reading of Erik Erikson, who worked with Murray for a short time in the 1930s. Erikson viewed the human life cycle in terms of eight psychosocial stages, ranging from the basic "trust vs. mistrust" dynamic in infancy to the last stage of "integrity vs. despair," to be faced in old age. The two stages I found most intriguing

were the late-adolescent stage of *identity* (vs. role confusion) and the middle-adult stage of *generativity* (vs. stagnation). Identity raises the question of "Who am I?" (and relatedly "How do I fit into the adult world?"). Generativity asks, "How can I contribute something to that world and to future generations as a positive legacy of the self?"

Murray and Erikson helped to keep me connected to Freud. Whereas Murray coded autobiographical memories for motivational themes in a way not completely dissimilar to Freud's treatment of dreams, Erikson composed full-length psychobiographies of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi that were informed by his own psychosocial reading of Freud. For me and for a number of other personality psychologists, Murray and Erikson are founding fathers in what we call the personological tradition in the social sciences. The *personological tradition* seeks to blend the tough and the tender in the study of persons, employing a wide range of scientific and interpretive methods to understand individual human lives in their full developmental and cultural contexts. Many of my closest colleagues today are members of a small group called the Society for Personology. Many of them also live double lives.

Scientific research

I love the humanities, but I believe in science. I will read Dostoyevsky over Darwin any day. (Who wouldn't?) But Darwin is potentially right (or wrong) about something in the world in a way that Dostoyevsky can never be. Ironically, this may give Dostoyevsky, or any great novelist, a certain edge over the individual scientist when it comes to long-term relevance. We still read and discuss Plato and Aristophanes, but the scientific contributions of ancient Greece are mainly historical curiosities today. Shakespeare has a kind of staying power that no scientist can ever, in good conscience, expect. In principle at least, science moves relentlessly forward, ruthlessly discarding theories once they outlive their usefulness and abandoning any hypothesis that turns out not to be supported by the data at hand. The more or less data-driven, open-ended, progressive, self-correcting, and socially consensual characteristics of the scientific enterprise are among those factors that give it a priority over other systems and approaches when it comes to explaining how the world works.

At Harvard, I learned how to *do* personality psychology in a scientific way. A key lesson for me was the need to develop reliable and valid measures of difficult to pin down constructs, like intimacy motivation. In my first academic position, at Loyola University of Chicago, I continued to collect data and test

hypotheses regarding intimacy motivation. Eventually, I turned my attention to the construct of generativity, which Erikson defined as the adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations. Again, I began with measurement, designing scales and thematic procedures for assessing individual differences in different aspects of generativity (McAdams and de St. Aubin, 1992). Some people (at certain points in their lives and in certain domains of functioning) are more generative than others. These individual differences, measured via the procedures developed by my research team, have been empirically linked to a wide range of important behavioral and social outcomes, ranging from parenting practices, voting and volunteer work to motivational conflict, mental health, and identity.

Intimacy motivation and generativity are two constructs that have proven useful in scientific studies of personality. They constitute two psychologically important and socially consequential dimensions with respect to which persons can be said to differ from each other. But people differ from each other in countless ways. How might personality psychologists ever account for all of these differences? Different personality theories – Freud, Jung, Adler, Murray, social learning theories, humanistic theories, trait theories – all make different claims as to what variables matter in accounting for human individuality. Traditionally, the field of personality psychology has suffered from a lack of consensus on what the full domain of human individuality might or should look like. I have obsessed over this problem since my graduate school days, for it goes directly to the definition of the very field of inquiry with which I identify as a scientist.

If personality psychology is the scientific study of the whole person, then what do we know when we know a person? The answer to this question, I believe, should define the scientific field of personality psychology. I have argued that the answer to the question is threefold, suggesting three different levels or discourses of personality (McAdams, 1995, 2001). A growing number of personality researchers are adopting my scheme. While I am flattered to have the impact, I am also frustrated by the tendency among my scientific colleagues to treat the three levels I have identified as if they were objective, concrete, absolute things. There is still a naive realism that runs through the science of personality psychology, as if constructs like “extroversion” and “ego strength” were tangible entities rather than useful constructions developed by a scientific community to make sense of what we see. Even when we identify those brain functions that give rise to individual differences in, say, openness to experience, the construct itself is defined in a social and cultural context. And we would never bother to examine the con-

struct if its manifestations were not judged to be important for life in the culture wherein we live.

Level One in my organizational scheme is the discourse of *dispositional traits*, which are described as broad and relatively stable individual differences in basic styles of thought, feeling, and behavior. Factor analytic studies suggest that these basic differences cluster into five general areas – introversion/extroversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience. Important advances in the field of personality psychology over the past 25 years now demonstrate that individual differences in basic personality traits are relatively stable over time, substantially heritable, and highly predictive of important cognitive, emotional, and behavioral trends aggregated across different situations.

Level Two brings in more developmentally and socially contingent and contextualized constructs of personality, such as goals and values, motives, stage-specific concerns, and domain specific skills and tendencies. I call these *characteristic adaptations*. They generally refer to what people want (and do not want) in life and how they strive to get what they want (and avoid what they do not want) in particular situations, at particular developmental periods, or with respect to particular social roles. Level Two is where we find intimacy motivation and generativity. Whereas dispositional traits like extroversion show substantial consistency over time, characteristic adaptations like generativity may wax and wane in importance as a function of changing circumstances and contexts.

Dispositional traits sketch an outline of human individuality. Characteristic adaptations fill in many of the details. In describing and seeking to explain what makes one person different from another, the personality psychologist should begin with reliable and valid data regarding where the person stands on a series of dispositional dimensions of human functioning and then move to the more contextualized and personally rich detail to be found in characteristic adaptations. Still, no combination of traits, motives, values, and developmental concerns will give the scientist a full understanding of what that person's life *means*. The meanings of lives lie, I believe, in stories, in the reconstructed *history* and anticipated future that come to be narrated as a self-defining personal myth. This is the sense, I now believe, in which Murray was prescient in 1938 when he wrote that the “*history* of the organism is the organism” (p.40). In modern societies like ours, people's internalized and evolving life stories constitute their *narrative identities*. Narrative identity is the third level of human personality.

Narrative identity: Making lives into stories

In the summer of 1982, I taught a graduate seminar at Loyola on the topic of self and identity. Only seven students signed up for the class, most of them from the PhD program in Clinical Psychology. They enjoyed reading and talking about Heinz Kohut's self psychology and the writings of Freud and the British object relations theorists, for the clinical applications in these works were clear. But the class conversations lagged when we considered William James's classic chapter on the self, Erikson's writings on identity, Goffman's dramaturgical approach, contributions from cognitive social psychology, and more philosophical offerings. The students found a bit too academic my obsession with these questions: What is identity? What would identity look like *if you could see it*? James imagined the "I" as a *stream*; Goffman invoked the imagery of roles and *performance*; Seymour Epstein described the self as akin to a *theory*, complete with axioms, corollaries, and hypotheses to be tested in everyday thought and behavior. I wanted a better metaphor.

No suitable metaphor arose that summer, but the students and I did make some progress in our thinking about self and identity, or at least they humored me into thinking we had. To frame class discussions, I found especially useful James's distinction between the self-as-subject (the "I") and the self-as-object (the "me"). James's stream of consciousness and the psychoanalytic conception of the ego are more about the I than the me, we concluded. Jane Loevinger describes the ego as a master synthesizer of experience. It is an active, agential force, a center of subjectivity, a position or stance, albeit shifting, from which the world is seen. Even if we believe in multiple I's in the same "person," each I is more like a perceiver or constructor of experience than like that which is perceived or constructed. By contrast, the me refers to aspects of selfhood that are potentially perceived or constructed, as in the notion of a self-concept, an enacted role, and Erikson's concept of identity. The I emerges early in experience, perhaps by the end of the first year of life. Once it emerges, the I begins to construct a me — an image of itself, as it were. Children's self-concepts (their mes) become progressively more complex and differentiated over time. "I am Amanda," my daughter would say, when she was seven years old. "I am a girl." "I live in a white house." "I am best friends with Jennifer." "I love to ice skate." "I want to be an artist when I grow up." "Other people say I'm cute." Amanda is describing her "me."

From Erikson's point of view, however, Amanda at age seven does not really have an identity yet. Sure, she has a self-concept. She knows what she is. She can ascribe traits and characteristic adaptations to herself — Levels One

and Two in my personality scheme. But *who* are you, Amanda? What does your life *mean*? What provides your life with *unity* and *purpose*? These questions make no sense to Amanda at age seven because the issues of who she is, what her life means, and what kinds of purpose may be discerned in it are not *problematic* for her. What's the problem? she screams. Quit bothering me with these stupid questions! For Erikson, identity kicks in when these questions become problematic, when they no longer seem so stupid. Today, Amanda is a college student. Lately, she has been wondering: Who am I? What does my life mean? The I encounters identity, in the Eriksonian sense, when the Me becomes a problem. This typically happens, Erikson maintained, in late adolescence and young adulthood.

Why does identity wait so long? Why isn't Amanda bothered by identity questions when she is seven years old? Erikson argued that puberty helps to usher in a new concern with selfhood. I am no longer a child, the teenager comes to realize. What am I now? And how is what I am now similar to and different from what I was before? Cognitive development also plays a crucial role in the birth of narrative identity. With the emergence of what Piaget called formal-operational thinking, adolescents begin to understand the self (me) and the world in highly abstract and hypothetico-deductive terms. They perceive inconsistencies in their thought and behavior as they move from one life situation to the next, and they seek to resolve these inconsistencies and construct a more coherent self. The self-as-object — the me — becomes something of an abstraction itself, Erikson maintained. It becomes an introspectively relevant problem to work on, or what Anthony Giddens calls a *self-reflexive project*. Furthermore, societal expectations and pressures weigh heavily in the adolescent years. Now is the time, adolescents are told, to think seriously about *who you are*. What do you want to do with your life? What do you really believe in? How will you make your way into the adult world? Now is the time for the I to begin to *arrange* the me into some kind of *configuration*, Erikson suggested, that may potentially provide life with some measure of unity and purpose. The configuration of the me — one's emerging identity in late adolescence and young adulthood — should make sense of who I am, who I was, and who I may be in the future. What kind of configuration might that be? If you could see it, what would it look like?

Some few months after I taught the class on self and identity I found the metaphor I was looking for. If you could see identity, I surmised, it would look like a *story*. A story incorporates a beginning, middle, and ending, working to organize a life into a reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future. A story might provide a sensible explanation of how a hero moves

through many different situations over time, plays many different roles, develops from one thing to another, and yet remains, in some fundamental, existential sense, the same hero over time and across situations and roles. A story typically contains multiple characters, to personify the different social roles that William James identified, and yet all the roles are integrated, in a sense, in that they exist within the same narrative frame. Beginning in late adolescence and young adulthood, I reasoned, people put their lives together into stories. They construct, internalize, and revise stories of the self. Like novelists, they work with the material they have been (implicitly) gathering for many years — key experiences that may stand out as critical scenes in the story, important interpersonal relationships, the values and norms of their society, and just about anything else that presents itself as something that could possibly work its way into a narrative to portray who I am. Identity is an internalized and evolving life narrative. Psychologically speaking, the narrative's primary function is to integrate a life, to provide an adult life with some degree of meaning, purpose, and unity.

As a person who studies life stories (and one occasionally prone to delusions of grandeur regarding his own narrative), I find it frustrating that I cannot recall clearly an epiphany scene in my own life wherein I suddenly came to believe that identity itself is like a life story. I also cannot sort out clearly what intellectual sources I drew upon to support my new claim. One book that strongly shaped my early views on the issue was Charmé's (1984) *Meaning and Myth in the Study of Lives: A Sartrean Perspective*. Charmé described Sartre's notion that human lives are, in some ways, like "true novels," which work to create narrative order out of the chaos of personal experience. But given that Charmé's book came out in 1984, I must have read it after I began thinking of identity as a life story. An obscure source that may have had a direct impact early on was Steele's (1982) psychobiography of Freud and Jung, wherein he argued that Freud's and Jung's theoretical differences were largely a result of the radically different stories they lived. Yet another even more obscure source, an eight-page chapter by Hankiss (1981), may also have primed me to think of identity as a story. Writing from a life-course, sociological perspective, Hankiss described different "ontologies of the self," in which individuals "mythologically re-arrange their life histories" (p.203) to create narrative explanations for how they believe they came to be. Yet another source was probably Tomkins's script theory of personality, introduced in Carlsson (1981). But my initial reading of Carlsson's précis coupled Tomkins's conception of life scripts with Goffman and other dramaturgical perspectives. Only later did I come to see Tomkins as something of a kindred spirit, for his

notion of life script shared many commonalities with my own idea of a life story.

Energized by the metaphor of identity as a life story, I began doing life-story interviews with middle-aged adults in the fall of 1982. Initially, I described this venture as an exploration of "developmental mythologies." Taking a lead from an interview protocol devised by James Fowler for studying faith development, I asked the participants to think about their lives as if their lives were books, to divide their lives up into chapters, to describe key scenes — like high points, low points, and turning points — in their lives, and to imagine the future chapters of their stories. I also collected TAT data and other self-report psychological measures. Trying to link the interest in life stories to the research program I had begun in graduate school, I looked for themes in life-narrative interviews that might be empirically associated with more established psychological variables, like intimacy motivation. Perhaps not surprisingly, I found that adults whose TATs suggested high intimacy motivation tended to construct life stories that placed priority on warm and close interpersonal relationships. By contrast, individuals high in power motivation (also assessed on the TAT) tended to tell more agentic life narratives, emphasizing content themes of impact, victory, autonomy, and self-mastery. I also examined the complexity of the life narrative accounts by identifying the number of different plot archetypes the narrators seemed to employ. Individuals with higher levels of ego development (assessed on a sentence-completion test) tended to construct more complex life narratives, drawing upon a wider range of plot prototypes and identifying more conflict and more change in their life stories, compared to individuals scoring lower in ego development.

A year later, I began work on my first book, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity* (McAdams, 1985). The book describes this early research linking life stories to personality variables, and it lays out a theory of identity as a life story. Beginning in late adolescence, I argued, people put their lives together into integrative narratives of the self. Accounts of these internalized stories can be "collected" in life-narrative interviews (and in open-ended questionnaires) and analyzed in objective, quantitative ways. Life stories incorporate many different content themes, but two main *thematic lines* appear to be agency/power and communion/intimacy. With respect to structure, life stories range from the simple to the complex, and these differences can also be measured and linked to other personality variables. Life stories contain key self-defining scenes or moments, which I called *nuclear episodes*. Narrators split themselves (the me) into different characters in the story, constructing multiple idealized personifications of the self, which I called

imagos. Imagos themselves may be high in agency (e.g., “the warrior,” “the sage”), high in communion (“the lover,” “the caregiver”), high in both agency and communion (“the healer,” “the peacemaker”), or low in both agency and communion (“the escapist,” “the survivor”). The imagos enact plots against a backdrop of personal beliefs and values, especially those drawn from religion, which I called the story’s *ideological setting*. Looking to future chapters, narrators often spell out how they will have a positive impact on the world and leave an enduring legacy, what I called a *generativity script*.

When I wrote *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story*, I believed I had found an effective way to synthesize my scientific and literary sensibilities. As a personality psychologist, I could examine the stories that people “have” about their lives. I could analyze and measure them as one might analyze and measure any psychological construct. Like a good personality psychologist, I could assess individual differences. Stories might be more complex and more variegated than, say, traits and motives, but they could still be pinned down long enough and with enough confidence so that the researcher could perform the necessary thematic dissection. In a sense, I was not unlike the naive realists I decried above, blithely assuming that psychological constructs — in this case, life stories — were *really* out there, or rather *in* there — that is, *in* people’s heads. Today, I still insist that stories are indeed in there, in some sense. But it all seems much more complex today (and problematic) than I saw it in 1985.

Problematicizing the story

In 1989, I moved to Northwestern University. I took a position in the Human Development and Social Policy (HDSP) program, located within the School of Education and Social Policy (SESP). HDSP brings together psychologists interested in human development with sociologists, economists, and policy experts. The HDSP program trains students to study and understand human development in the broad context of families, communities, and society, and it seeks to promote applied research that will inform public policy.

Shortly after I moved to Northwestern, I also began to work with students in the SESP Counseling Psychology PhD program. When the program in counseling shut down in the mid-1990s, I negotiated a move of half of my faculty line into Northwestern’s Psychology Department, where I now work mainly with students in Clinical Psychology. As a result, today I am half time in HDSP and half time in Psychology — two dramatically different intellectual cultures. HDSP is wide ranging and interdisciplinary: Researchers employ methods ranging from econometrics to case-based ethnographies. In HDSP, I

am one of a number of scholars interested in narratives and in qualitative methodologies in the social sciences. My background in empirical personality research, furthermore, gives me the odd reputation in HDSP of being one of the more hard-nosed scientists in the school. By contrast, Northwestern’s Psychology Department is a very straight-laced, laboratory-based operation, wherein almost everybody (except me) runs experiments in laboratories. Even quantitative survey methods are regarded with some suspicion in this Psychology Department, and life stories, well, what are they? Yet my Psychology colleagues seem to respect me, mainly because my empirical research in personality gets published in mainline journals. I am their token humanist.

Had I remained the person I was in 1985, with the publication of *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story*, my life in the Psychology Department at Northwestern would be much easier today. But had I frozen things at the level of my first book, I would never have landed the job in HDSP in the first place. By the time I got to Northwestern, my research was already moving in a more explicitly developmental direction, which was to become apparent in my second book on life stories, *The Stories We Live By* (McAdams, 1993). I had begun to talk more about a sociologically ascribed life *course* over and against a psychologically mandated life *cycle*, and I was already paying much closer attention than I did a few years earlier to social and cultural contexts in the construction of life narratives. I had also begun to see problems with the easy synthesis I had forged in my first book. Not only were life stories constructed through social interaction, as I acknowledged from the get-go, but they were also performed with respect to particular audiences, told with respect to certain discursive aims and traditions, and tailored for short-term strategic ends. Not only did stories integrate lives and provide some semblance of unity and purpose, as I argued in my first book, but they could also disrupt lives, express discontinuity and incoherence, contradict themselves and confuse their audiences, and fulfill a wide range of other functions — psychological, social, economic, political — that had little to do with Erikson’s conception of identity. Stories could still be pinned down (momentarily) and analyzed, I continued to believe, but the researcher had to be much humbler and more careful than I seemed to be in my first book, wherein I described clear thematic patterns in stories, universal mythic archetypes, and fully articulated ideological settings simpatico with the plots and characters portrayed. Stories now seemed more dynamic, complex, fragmentary, contradictory, strategic, and socially constructed than they had only a few years before.

By the time I moved into HDSP, I had lost interest in the construct of intimacy motivation and was focusing much of my empirical attention on

generativity. Given that I was a new father at the time, this shift seemed to make personal sense. It also made professional sense, for generativity linked readily to such policy-relevant ideas as parenting, volunteerism, and citizenship — issues to which my HDSP colleagues routinely turned their attention. As my students and I examined the manifestations and correlates of generativity among midlife adults in the research we conducted in the 1990s, we began to explore the life stories of adults who distinguished themselves in the realm of generativity.

In two ambitious studies, we administered our generativity measures to hundreds of adults, ranging in age from 35 to 65 years, and then called back for life-story interviews those adults scoring either especially high or especially low in generativity. Our first study focused mainly on professional white adults; the second incorporated African-American and white adults, working class and professional. After poring over the interview protocols for many years and coding them for a wide range of topics and ideas, we discovered a set of themes that consistently differentiated between the two groups. Central among these themes is the idea of *redemption* — which we define as the deliverance from suffering to an enhanced status or state. Put simply, highly generative adults tend to construct life-narrative accounts that contain a greater number of redemption episodes — scenes that begin with suffering but move to deliverance — than do adults scoring lower in generativity. In addition, highly generative adults are more likely than less generative adults to construct stories in which the protagonist (a) enjoys a special advantage early in life; (b) expresses sensitivity to the suffering of others or societal injustices as a child; (c) establishes a clear and strong belief system in adolescence that remains a source of unwavering conviction through the adult years; (d) experiences significant conflicts between desires for agency/power and desires for communion/intimacy; and (e) looks to achieve goals to benefit society in the future. Taken together, these themes depict a common life-narrative prototype embraced by many productive and caring midlife men and women in contemporary American society — what I call the *redemptive self*.

The redemptive self is a life-story prototype that serves well the generative efforts of midlife American adults, both black and white, both male and female. Their redemptive narratives suggest that these especially productive and caring men and women seek to give back to society in gratitude for the early blessings their stories tell them they obtained. In everyday life, generativity is tough and frustrating work. But if an adult constructs a narrative identity in which the protagonist's suffering in the short run often gives way to reward later on, he or she may be better able to sustain the conviction that

seemingly thankless investments today will pay off for the future generation. Redemptive life stories support the kind of life strivings that a highly generative man or woman is likely to set forth.

But the redemptive self also says as much about American culture as it does about the highly generative American adults who tend to tell this kind of story about their lives. In my new book, *The Redemptive Self*, I argue that the life-story themes expressed by highly generative American adults recapture and couch in a psychological language especially cherished, as well as hotly contested, ideas in American cultural history — ideas that appear prominently in spiritual accounts of 17th-century Puritans, Benjamin Franklin's 18th-century autobiography, slave narratives and Horatio Alger stories from the 19th century, and the literatures of self-help and American entrepreneurship in the 20th century (McAdams, 2005). From the Puritans to Emerson to Oprah, the redemptive self has morphed into many different storied forms in the past 300 years as Americans have sought to narrate their lives through the redemptive discourses of atonement, emancipation, recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility. The stories speak of heroic individual protagonists — the *chosen people* — whose *manifest destiny* is to make a positive difference in a dangerous world, even when the world does not wish to be redeemed. The stories translate a deep script of American exceptionalism into the many contemporary discourses of success, recovery, development, and so on. It is as if especially generative American adults are, for better and for worse, the most ardent narrators of an oh-so American story.

In the past 20 years, social scientists of many different stripes have come to construe individual lives, social relationships, and cultural trends in terms of *narrative*. A major insight coming out of this wide-ranging literature is that life stories are *cultural texts*. Life stories reflect class and gender categories, political and economic forces, religious traditions, history, folklore, and the shifting complexities and uncertainties of contemporary postmodern life. Strongly influenced by many of these writings, I now look to life stories, like the redemptive self, to learn about the cultural world that the narrator inhabits. What kinds of stories can be told in that world? What are the privileged, master narratives? What counts as a *good* story in a given cultural context? What kinds of stories are marginalized? What kinds of stories cannot be told? Yet these cultural texts come to the listener through the voice and the consciousness (the I-ness) of an individual narrator, an agential self (the I) who appropriates what culture has to offer, selects and discards, modifies and personalizes in order to tell a story that aims, in some sense, to be true to lived experience. Life stories are not the neat individual constructions I imagined in

1985, but not are they the hapless social constructions described by some postmodern theorists. Culture shapes narratives for sure, but narrators appropriate culture. Today I see life stories as *psychosocial constructions* – doubly authored by self and the social world.

In 1985, I knew that narrators tailor their storied accounts for particular audiences. But I saw this fact as a nuisance more than an opportunity. My training in personality psychology taught me to look for true scores on psychological constructs amidst measurement error. The fact that my research participants might tell me one thing and their parents another regarding the worst event that ever happened in their lives suggested a measurement error that I would need to work around. To minimize error, therefore, I developed a standardized interview, trained interviewers carefully, and developed objective content analysis systems for coding the narrative data once we had obtained them. I still believe that these methodological maneuvers are essential for doing the kind of hypothesis-testing studies I conduct with life stories. Had I not done things this way, I would never have discovered and validated the thematic categories that I now see as comprising the redemptive self.

Today, however, I tend to see the interviews we do in terms of a *co-construction* of narrative identity. A narrative account is performed before a particular kind of audience (the interviewer) in a particular kind of research setting. What results is not “the-one-and-only” life story a person “has” – the “true” story behind all the other performances – but it is not any old fleeting account either. Participants come to the setting with a wealth of images, metaphors, and accounts at their disposal – narrative resources that they *have*. They also have a great deal of implicit knowledge about the nature of interviews and research. They know that the interviewer wants something akin to the “truth” as they, the narrator, understands it. They know that the interviewer wants to know who they are, how they came to be, and where their life may be going in the future. They see their role as that of the subject of a biography. People have read or seen biographies on television. They are conversant in the norms of the genre – that they should tell about how things began in their lives, for example, that they should tell how things developed as well as remained the same, that they should identify heroes and villains, high points and turning points, that their lives should seem to be going somewhere. People have stories about these kinds of issues – stories that are different from the ones they might tell when trying, say, to woo a lover, or get a job, or pass the time waiting in line at the Wal-Mart. It is exactly these kinds of stories, performed in the presence of a sympathetic and curious biographer, that reflect a person’s narrative identity. I believe the kinds of interviews my stu-

dents and I do are well designed to bring to the performance the kinds of internalized stories that do explain for people how they came to be, stories that provide their lives with some semblance of unity and purpose. I believe that the storied accounts we hear do reflect an inner sense of narrative identity.

But I do not believe this as categorically as I did in 1985. I now see life narrative accounts as serving many different purposes. They provide identity for sure, but they are also told to entertain, instruct, enlighten, deceive, and disrupt. Many scholars have emphasized these other, non-identity functions in their writings on narrative. Accordingly, I have become fascinated with the many different hermeneutical strategies and epistemological stances expressed by the growing number of social scientists who engage in what Josselson and Lieblich (1993) call *the narrative study of lives*. The narrative study of lives takes me further and further away from my graduate school training in personality research. I now find stories themselves to be just as interesting as the people who tell them – probably more interesting, if truth be told. I enjoy immersing myself in the texts of people’s life stories almost as much as I enjoyed pouring over the texts of Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard in my freshman year at college. I say to myself, forget about the author for a minute: What does the text itself say to me? Forget about trying to figure out what kind of person wrote this text. Instead, ask this: What meanings may I glean from the story itself? And what meanings are being kept away from me? What does the story *not* say? Why doesn’t the story say that? And on and on. When I first came to the idea that identity may be construed as a life story, I thought I had begun to solve the psychological problem of identity. But now I see that stories themselves are the problem for me – but a fascinating one.

This chapter narrates aspects of my own life story – aspects centered on the development of my *ideas* in psychology. I do believe that the story I have told shows a certain degree of *progress* in my thinking about the intellectual problems that began to emerge for me in my freshman year at college. Although my suffering has not been especially intense, I do believe that the story also expresses a modicum of redemption. At the same time, certain problems and conflicts have not been resolved. I am still split between the world of empirical psychology and the humanities. I still want to do scientific research on stories, even as I realize that stories will always resist my best efforts. I still lead something of a double life. But the fact that I can tell it to you in what I believe to be a coherent story tells me that a story can provide a life, even mine, with some degree of unity, purpose, and identity, even as it does so much more.

Life as a Symphony

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Overture

Where did we come from? Where are we going? And what's the point of the trip? Always intrigued by these big questions, as I grew older I came to see they were not merely my own. They are the hallmark of human existence: we are the being for whom the meaning of our being is a question. As Heidegger has shown, we are the occasion for Being to manifest itself through our capacity to attend to what it means to be. In responding to that call to own our capacity for manifesting Being emerges our consciousness, and our freedom. And our mortal responsibility, because unless we enact the meaningfulness of our existence, we spend our lives as if they were mindless accidents, manifesting nothing more than random collisions of protoplasm.

Psychology's contribution is to examine the particular subquestion "What does it mean to be a human being?" Though most psychologists avoid addressing this question, they answer it nonetheless, inevitably, but then only implicitly. For every psychology is necessarily also a perspective, however presupposed, about what it means to be human. Some imply that to be human is to be an organism, a biochemical compound or a physiological system, or a neural network. Other psychologies imply that to be human is to be a conditioned response, a moment in an ongoing causal chain of stimulus-response mechanisms, driven by contingencies of reinforcements. Others view the human as an information-processing system, computationally applying the grammatic rules to bits of information.

But such perspectives focus only on the anonymous profile of human being, that is, lacking the essentially human act of owning one's own existence. Therefore, they are at best theories of the *infra-human* order - and