

Living the

Narrative Life

Stories as a Tool for
Meaning Making

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Foreword by Todd Taber

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*For Edel and Cormac,
the two most important stories of my life*

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Telling Your Own Story

in at Walgreen's, I'll buy

to do, start over."

at us, we can't get back

away,

Maxwell Street Days

"You can each have a nickel to buy one comic book," said my mom to my brother, Rob, and me. It was Maxwell Street Day in Platteville, Wisconsin, the first Friday in August 1973. I had not yet entered the first grade.

In those days, Maxwell Street Day was a giant community garage sale. People from all over the county would line Main Street from top to bottom with tables of clothes, books, antiques, jewelry, fishing lures, and used tools. The regular stores on Main Street also put out tables with sale items, and there were hot dog stands and burgers and cotton candy. There were lots of good deals and lots of talking with friends and neighbors. But the best part was looking for treasure among all the junk.

I can't remember what Rob bought that day, but I bought a copy of *The Justice League of America* (Fox 1968). The cover was missing, but the splash page showed a cave of superheroes trapped in standing coffins that the villain, the nefarious T. O. Morrow, was striding past in triumph. Batman was one of the heroes in that issue, and I bought the comic because I somehow knew who he was, even though neither the live-action Batman television show nor the Super Friends animated cartoon had yet come to television in the Platteville area. Not that we would have been able to pick up either show at our house on Mockingbird Road. We lived seven miles from the town and could pick up only two television stations, both of them fuzzy.

Childhood's Storied Roots

The stories of our childhoods shape us forever. The eminent narrative scholar and children's teacher Vivian Paley says children are instinctive

storytellers who learn to understand the world through the telling of these narratives:

Amazingly, children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form. If they worry about being lost, they become the parents who search; if angry, they find a hot hippopotamus to impose his will on the world. Even happiness has its plot and characters: "Pretend I'm the baby and you only love me and you don't talk on the telephone." . . . Somewhere in each fantasy is a lesson that promises to lead me to questions and commentary, allowing me to glimpse the universal themes that bind together the individual urgencies. (1990, 4)

From the beginning, we are telling stories to figure out who we are and where our place is in the world. But my purpose here is not to prove this fact to you. You already know it to be true. All you need to do is pause for a moment and remember your childhood: what did you care about then, who were you, what stories can't you forget? Paley, as she explores this issue of the power of childhood stories, identifies one of her own central narratives: "Indeed, my strongest childhood memories are of the daily chase of good and bad guys on the playground. Was I part of it or did I only watch? Silently I replayed the dialogues during the school day, and a note I wrote to someone—or perhaps it was written to me—reappears in my mind even today. 'What will you be? Can we pretend sisters?'" (5). Hearing Paley's memory, it's easy to imagine a touch of longing in her voice: perhaps she was an only child; perhaps she had few friends. Hers might be a story about needing companionship. Perhaps that's why she became an amazing teacher, still able to be touched by young children reaching out to connect with her.

Arguing for Stories

Living the narrative life is about embracing the stories that make us who we are. The traditionally academic way to explore this issue would be to prove that the stories shape our personalities. I might draw on the work of Jerome Bruner, for instance, who explores how narratives help shape our understanding of self (1990, 111–15) and how our psychological understanding of reality is formed through narrative modes of thought (1986, 88). Such an approach, though, is built upon a combative arrangement between the writer and the reader. This argumentative mode requires me to arrange evidence to counter any doubts one might have about my claim that stories construct us. This is an approach built around the logic of objectivist argumentation. Such an approach creates distance between writer and reader, depersonalizes. It is, in short, a nonnarrative form of writing, of seeing the world.

In place of this, I offer here an exploration of how readers might benefit from telling their own stories. I attempt to enact this exploration by telling a real story I've taken from my own life. It is my hope that this approach will engage readers in a real desire to begin recording their own stories as I try to show how powerful such acts can be. Thus, what I am attempting to do here is take a narrative approach to the problem of convincing readers to value stories. I want to use stories to argue that stories are worth arguing for. There are already so many academic books that celebrate essayistic life, the cool, objective life of science. I offer, in contrast, then, a narrative approach to life. I offer a story about why we need to tell stories.

Who Am I?

As a kid, my world was full of dangers: poison ivy, loose gravel that would skid a bike out of control, oversized schoolyard bullies, mothers with plates of vegetables, girls' slimy kisses. To battle all these evil demons, I used to carry around a wooden shield. The shield was made of sanded pine, smooth and cool to the touch. It was perfectly round, twelve inches in diameter, and had a small wooden handle on one side. I had used crayons to color alternating red and white circles from the outside of the shield to a one-inch ring at the middle. In the very center of the shield I had drawn a white five-pointed star on a circle of blue. The shield was, I felt, an exact replica of the one Captain America used when he joined the Avengers (Lee 1963). The only flaw in my shield was one tiny hole near the outer edge. This hole had been a spout through which had been poured the contents of the barrel that the shield had originally covered. Unfortunately, that hole tended to limit the effectiveness of my shield for stopping bullets the way Captain America's did, but the hole did give me a good handhold for slinging the shield at bad guys.

That one comic book I had bought on Maxwell Street Day had sprouted into a modest collection by the time I was ten. I used to carry all my comic books in one oversized, heavy-duty plastic bag with white plastic handles that would snap shut. In those days I didn't worry about keeping my comics in mint condition. I just liked to read them, over and over. That was how I spent the summer of 1979—reading comic books. My parents had just bought seven acres of land in the country. My father, who was a professor but had once been a carpenter's apprentice, was building a new house for us. He and the professional carpenter he had hired worked on the house all summer. My brother spent each day watching them and pounding in the occasional nail. I sat on a canvas deck chair about twenty yards down the hill, in the shade of some oak trees, just at the edge of the sound of the hammering. I didn't care about building things; I just liked to read.

Of course, that was partly because I was clumsy and uncoordinated. I had been hit by a car when I was six, had broken my leg, and though the injury had healed, I was never any good at sports after that. I remember once bragging to my mother that I had finally beaten one of the girls during the six hundred-yard dash, so I didn't come in last; my mother burst into tears when she heard my story. Small wonder, then, that I lost myself in a world of superheroes. Captain America had been a scrawny kid, too, before volunteering to be injected with the super soldier serum that made him powerful. Spider-Man was a geeky bookworm before a radioactive spider bite gave him superhuman powers. The fantasy world of superheroes was a place where shy, unassuming guys like me became the center of attention. And it was a world where it didn't matter if you were smart, either. Iron Man built his own supercharged suit of armor to protect his heart and to fight evil. Ant Man was a scientist who fought crime using his own inventions. Batman had no powers at all other than his brilliant mind!

In the comic books, the story of how a superhero gets his power is called the origin issue. But if I wanted to tell my own origin story, as the Professor, one version would surely be grounded in my reading of comic books. Unfortunately, most English professors don't wear cool costumes or fight much crime besides plagiarism. Nevertheless, the world of comic books that I entered through reading taught me to value the world of fiction. Before long, I was writing my own comic books, too. The Crime Killers, a group of superheroes who looked very much like D. C. Comic's Justice League, was my favorite invention. They had all kinds of battles, from the middle of the Pacific Ocean to the Sahara Desert. From there, I was soon reading the mythologies of the Greeks and Norsemen, writing my own myths, seeing *Star Wars* and reading science fiction, and finally devouring the classic Western canon, from *Moby Dick* to Shakespeare. My life trajectory into double majoring in English and journalism in college, working as a technical writer, and then pursuing a doctorate and teaching position in the field of composition were all in some ways linked to my early exposure to comic books.

Yet even more than that, because I began my literary education not with the classics but instead with comic books, I've also maintained a sympathy for and interest in alternative forms of representation. Thus my valuing of narrative expression over the more widely accepted academic discourse of the field is in some ways the result of how my childhood literacy story unfolded. My love of comics, an often-derided art form, has caused me to find value in alternate discourses in the face of damning outside judgments. I have, I suppose, grown accustomed to being a literary outsider. Of course, this form of othering pales besides more serious forms of discrimination, yet the othering is still both troubling and identity-shaping for those who expe-

rience it. In his memoir, famed writer Stephen King talks about the shame associated with the genre of writing he loves, the horror story. Consider his comment on the subject, for example,

"What I don't understand, Stevie," [Miss Hisler] said, "is why you'd write junk like this in the first place. You're talented. Why do you want to waste your abilities?" . . . She waited for me to answer—to her credit, the question was not entirely rhetorical—but I had no answer to give. I was ashamed. I have spent a good many years since—too many, I think—being ashamed about what I write. (2000, 49–50)

Reflected in this quote is a common concern about the way certain discourses are othered. Like little Stevie, I heard the same thing many times from my parents and teachers about comic books: "Why are you reading that trash?" My father even limited me to buying one comic book a month and required me to read novels from an approved list of classics as well. Only years later, when comic books began to accrue high value as collectibles and *Spider-Man* became the fifth-highest grossing film of all time, earning \$403,706,375 at the box office (Yahoo! Movies 2003), did I feel my interest in comics had earned a bit of dignity. But as King says, the feeling of shame lingers on.

Living the narrative life, then, means learning that who you are is all about the stories that form your life. Both my career as a composition professor and my love of alternate discourses began as far back as 1973 when I roamed Platteville's Maxwell Street Day with a nickel in my hand. My beliefs, my values, my tastes, and my biases are all linked to the stories of my life. And thus, as I write my own story, I come to understand better what motivates me, what drives me, what predisposes me to certain kinds of philosophical stances. Not that I can shake off those stories: my love of comics, which has led to my amassing a collection of some five thousand books, won't go away. But, in retelling those stories, I can see how, for example, my teaching has been affected: if I allow students to write fantasy stories in an introductory composition course or grade a science fiction story highly for creativity, I am looking to reshape the academic world into a place where I would have fit. I'm resisting becoming Miss Hisler, resisting calling any literary genre trash. I am, in effect, trying to honor the stories that made me who I am. Living the narrative life means never closing the book on your own stories.

Preserving Your Past

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera 1986, 3). The past slips farther from us each day: names, faces, the way sunlight bounced off a pool of water just before you dove into

it. Kundera points to the more alarming ramifications of memory loss: the way control of the world is altered by those who tell our history. It is easy to see the truth of Kundera's claims if we look to the way politicians make one claim while running a campaign and then act as if they had never said such things when it comes to their actions in office. Consider, for instance, that when George W. Bush campaigned for United States president, he ran as a candidate who could bridge partisan gaps, going so far as to say in his presidential acceptance speech, "I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation" (Wagner 2000). Three years into his presidency, Republicans and Democrats were bitterly divided and Bush's spokespeople no longer mention bipartisanship as a goal of his administration.

On a practical level, however, the grand stories of national and world events seldom work their way down to our lives in specific ways. We can complain about presidential politics or shed tears over national tragedies, but then we go on living our ordinary lives. So while we might vow not to forget, as political critic Michael Moore (2002) does when he says, "Al Gore is the elected President of the United States. He received 539,898 more votes than George Bush" (2), we really can't do much to directly rewrite the story of our nation. Even voting doesn't seem to count, or be counted, for much these days.

Far more important, I would argue, than our frustrations over distant problems are the real incidents and events that make up our lives: birthday parties, a first kiss, the loss of a loved one, taking a walk in the moonlight. Some of these memories, of course, stay with us forever. But too many fade despite how much we might wish to hold onto them. It's especially easy to see this when one thinks of close friends who have slipped from acquaintance as time and distance have intervened in life. Peoples' names and faces last for a while, but many of the good times slip away. Telling our own stories is one way to hang on to these memories, to preserve the details, to save and treasure things that really mattered to us.

Like the time Dave, Steve, and I were walking back from a Burger King run. It was during final exams week at the University of Wisconsin and Burger King always ran these one-dollar Whopper specials. So we'd each eat two or three Whoppers, not even bothering with French fries because the burgers were cheaper.

And then on this night, as we got back near the dorm, Dave said, "Why don't we climb that wall?"

We told Dave he was nuts, but Dave said it was the kind of thing a superhero would do, and since we were all comic book collectors, we decided it was a challenge worth tackling, no matter how risky. The wall was maybe twenty feet high and went up at a sloping angle. It was made of large boulders that offered plenty of handholds. The fall would have hurt, probably would have led to someone literally breaking a leg, but it was a manageable climb, and so the three of us set off. The first few feet were pretty easy, and Dave and I moved up quickly. We were a little more fit than Steve, who had to pull himself harder, but we all were managing the climb. But then, about two-thirds of the way up, I felt my arms start to shake a little. I got nervous, then, and it seemed I couldn't find any more handholds.

"I'm going back down," I said. "This is stupid."

"Oh, come on, Gian," said Dave. "We're so close now."

And Steve said, "You can't quit, Gian. This is our one chance to be superheroes."

And then the fear passed and my hands calmed down, and I pulled up over the last few feet. Dave caught my hand at the top, and we were there, towering twenty feet above Ogg Hall's parking delivery area.

All that was left to do then was for the three of us to do our secret handshake.

Taking risks, conquering fears, defining friendships: we can preserve all of these when we record our stories. The stories might be silly or serious, epiphanies or mistakes. The point is, these stories belong to us. They're not delivered by a television. They're not canonized by some literary critic. The simplest stories are often the ones we treasure most, and so they're the ones we need to write down, either to share or just to save, but always to make sure we don't lose them.

Elsewhere I have written about the value of narratives for preserving history, the value of creating narrative accounts of important events, such as the 1997 Teaching in Cyberspace Through Online Courses (TicToc) Symposium. In my article "The TicToc Story," I discussed why it was useful to write a story about the events of that symposium: "to preserve a historical record of the event; to preserve some of the thoughts and ideas that existed during this short moment in time; to provide, through narrative, alternative ways of understanding the TicToc project, ways perhaps more intuitively or emotionally based; to help readers connect to the people and the spirit which was/is TicToc" (1997, 46).

The Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Tim O'Brien (1990b) considers it vital that we use stories to preserve the lives of the people we meet. He argues, in fact, that our lives depend on such stories:

But this too is true: stories can save us. I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, and even still, right here, I keep dreaming Linda alive. And Ted Lavender, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed, and an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world. (255)

Writing down our stories can even help us remember events that were lost. I had completely forgotten my treacherous climb up that rock wall until I began this section. But now the story has come back to me, and it is preserved here. In this case, it's a story that might not matter much to anyone but me and Dave and Steve. But my hope is that as this story is read, it will jog other people's memories. We each have stories of friendship, special times we wouldn't trade for gold. I've just found one of those stories from my life and, I hope, now I'm not alone.

Living the narrative life means learning that our stories matter and, therefore, wanting to record them.

Developing Narrative Sympathy

I remember my first comic book so well because before I could buy my second one, a car hit me. I was walking home from first grade. I was maybe a block or two from Hamner Robbins School. A few of my friends were on the other side of the street, and they called me to come over. So I looked, quickly, and darted out between two parked cars. Then I found myself lying in the street with people talking to me, and I was calling for my mom. My lunch box, an orange and blue Hot Wheels lunch box, did make it to the other side of the street, where someone found it, smashed in on one side. It's a shame, about the lunch box; it would be worth a small fortune now.

I wound up in the hospital for what seemed like ages. They put me in a body cast because my left leg was broken. I don't remember the operation or the pain, the smells, or the noises. What I do remember is being in the hospital ward, in a high bed with stiff white sheets. The T.V. had a remote control. It was a little beige box with a couple of buttons and a long black wire that ran up to the back of the T.V. I liked to just hold the button down and listen to the channels click by one at a time. I may have been one of the first people to ever channel surf.

Sometimes I had the ward to myself, but there were a few other beds in there, and the nurses moved people in and out of there from time to time. I spent forever in that hospital ward: months and months. Years, even. I was six. My mother would know how long I was really there. But it wasn't far short of forever.

At one point, a teenage boy got assigned to my room. He was tall and thin with dirty blonde hair. His arms looked a little scrawny from what I could see of them. The sad thing is, I don't even know what his name was. I suppose I learned it and just forgot. What I do remember, though, is that this kid was a comic book collector. He had tons of comic books, a bunch on his bedside table and some more in a box by his bed and tons and tons at his home. So the kid and I would talk and flip through the T.V. channels and read comic books. I remember he had issue number 145 of *The Fantastic Four* in which the Human Torch and Medusa fought Ternak in the snowy netherlands of Antarctica. I read that comic book with amazement. We both had a good time. I seemed to make him laugh a lot.

The kid had leukemia. It hurt like hell. Every night he'd start screaming in pain, and I would wake up scared and press the black call button for the night nurse. But she would never come. The kid would scream and scream, and I would press and press the button. Then I would just start shouting for someone to come help us. Then it would pass and he would lie there quietly for a while. The room would be dark with just a little light coming in from the hall.

"Are you alright?" I asked one night. "Is the pain gone?"

"Who's your favorite superhero?" he said in reply.

"I don't know too many," I told him. "Batman, I guess. He has a pretty neat costume."

"Mine's Professor X. He's this bald guy who's in a wheelchair. He doesn't wear a costume. He can't even walk. But he's got these mind powers. He can do all kinds of stuff with his mind. Blast people and read their thoughts."

"That'd be cool," I said. "There are a few people I'd like to blast."

"Yeah, he's powerful. He's got his own superhero team called the X-Men. And he can do all sorts of things. Even though he can't leave his wheelchair."

We lay there, then, in the darkness. Maybe the nurse finally came. Or maybe I fell asleep again. Or maybe we just waited in silence. It didn't matter. Before long, the screaming started again.

In the mornings, a woman would come by the hospital rooms with a cart that had candy and toys and flowers. There were comic books on it, too, and so the next time my mom came for a visit, I asked her to buy me *The Fantastic Four* comic my friend had let me read. He wasn't in the room at the

Probably gone to therapy or somewhere. When he got back, he said, "Why'd you buy that? I would have given you my copy."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't know that."

A few days later, the kid left the hospital. He said he was going back home. And then he put a big box of comics on the bed and said I could have them all. So I wound up with two copies of *The Fantastic Four*. And my friend? My mother told me people with leukemia often didn't live very long. But I liked to imagine that he had gone off to a secret lab somewhere and been injected with a new drug that not only cured his leukemia but also gave him never-before-seen superpowers. So, he's off fighting crime somewhere and using his powers to do good.

Telling your own story sensitizes you to the stories of others. Sometimes that's a burden. The real story, of course, is that they sent my friend home to die with his family. They couldn't treat his leukemia. And he ran out of time. My mother said she sent his family flowers because he was so nice to me and it was so sad for a teenager to have to die like that.

There are lots of people in our stories: good guys and bad, tragic characters, and mysterious personages. When we tell our own story, it reminds us that we're not alone, that we depend on others to help us along the way, to reach the happy endings. My friend needed stories. He needed to know that there were people like Professor X who could get beyond their wheelchairs, reach beyond their illnesses. And I needed my friend's stories: the stories in his comic books, of colorful heroes and wild adventures and evil villains, and the story in his head, of a boy dying of leukemia who reached out with a box of comics and passed on a treasure. These shared stories made us friends. That was all either of us could ask for or give. Stories connect us to other people, and we have a responsibility to respond to those stories. In his book *The Call of Stories*, the psychologist Robert Coles (1989) talks about how his mentors helped him learn the value and necessity of these stories. One of his mentors was the famous physician and poet William Carlos Williams, who put the lesson this way: "Their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them" (30). Living the narrative life means answering the call stories impose.

Celebrating Me

I've been teaching composition for twelve years, and every semester a few students ask me if they are allowed to use the word *I* in their papers. Why English teachers ever got into the habit of banning words rather than celebrating them, I'll never understand.

Taking away the word *I* is the same as taking away someone's power of speech. Certainly, people can write documents to instruct and inform others. But if there is any real value in the act of writing, it is in how we use writing to teach ourselves. To live a narrative life, a person needs to understand this. When I write, I write for me: the writing helps me figure out who I am, what's important to me, what I think and know.

Donald Murray (1991) argues that all writing is autobiographical, that even if we remove the word *I* from our vocabulary, we are always writing from our own particular vantage point in the world:

We are autobiographical in the way we write; my autobiography exists in the examples of writing I use in this piece and in the text I weave around them. I have my own peculiar way of looking at the world and my own way of using language to communicate what I see. My voice is the product of Scottish genes and a Yankee environment, of Baptist sermons and the newspaper city room, of all the language I have heard and spoken.

In writing this paper I have begun to understand, better than I ever have before, that all writing, in many different ways, is autobiographical, and that our autobiography grows from a few deep taproots that are set down into our past in childhood. (66)

Even when we construct an "objective" argument, our choices have been shaped by our life histories. Murray argues that writers really have only a handful of topics, all deeply rooted in their pasts.

If Murray is right, then it's when we don't include *I* in our writing that we're wasting our time. Murray cites research by Vera John-Steiner into the importance of allowing students to pursue their private interests in their writing, even when students seem to be obsessing on a particular topic. Murray sees this as highly valuable because such personally focused writing helps students come to terms with issues that are troubling them. In fact, Murray argues that we need to let students do more of this sort of writing, not less:

I do not think we should move away from personal or reflective narrative in composition courses, but closer to it; I do not think we should limit reflective narrative to a single genre; I do not think we should make our students write on many different subjects, but that they write and rewrite in pursuit of those few subjects which obsess them. (73)

I, I, I—is this a turning inward, obsessive nihilism, an overnarrowing of our gaze? Perhaps. But we have only one pair of eyes. We're always locked into our own worlds. Placing myself into my writing helps me figure out exactly where my vantage point is, where I'm standing, where I'm coming

from, and where I'm going. We've got to figure ourselves out in order to figure other people out.

Murray even argues that the reading we do is autobiographical in nature; we read about and come to understand other people's lives by interpreting these texts through the lenses of the stories we know. And artificial intelligence researcher Roger Schank lends support:

When people talk to you, they can only tell you what they know. And the knowledge that people have about the world around them is really no more than the set of experiences that they have had. Now, of course, not every experience that someone has had is worth remembering, let alone telling to someone else. The experiences we do remember form the set of stories that constitute our view of the world and characterize our beliefs. In some sense, we may not even know what our own view of the world is until we are reminded of and tell stories that illustrate our opinion on some aspect of the world. (1990, 29)

Schank's research focuses on trying to create computers that can think like people. And to do that, he tries to build computers that can tell stories. Schank says that our minds store information in the form of stories that we can retrieve for later use:

What makes us intelligent is our ability to find out what we know when we need to know it. What we actually know is all the stories, experiences, "facts," little epithets, points of view, and so on that we have gathered over the years. . . . When our experiences come to mind, we can adapt them to a new situation if we are problem-solving, reduce them to a one-liner if we are in a short conversation, or tell them whole if we have an interested listener. We can compare two stories and attempt to find the similarities and differences, or we can alter a story to invent a new one for some purpose. . . . Knowledge, then, is experiences and stories, and intelligence is the apt use of experience and the creation and telling of stories. Memory is memory for stories, and the major processes of memory are the creation, storage, and retrieval of stories. (15–16)

Schank's work helps us see how our own stories help us make sense of the world. We figure new things out by calling to mind stories that seem related. We try to understand things that are different for us through the lens of things that are familiar. In short, we have to find some way to write ourselves into the story if we want to understand it. The essayist Adam Gopnik explores the motivations of writers who retell other people's stories in his article "The Story of Us All." In this case, Gopnik examines Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, which is a reworking of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with*

the Wind. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall replaces Mitchell's hero, Scarlett, with her mulatto half sister, named Cinnamon. Gopnik argues that retelling such a story is not simply about trying to provide a critique of the original work or even a more equitable account. Rather, he says, the urge is more emotional:

The whole let-me-tell-you-what-they-won't craze, in fact, seems to have started back in the sixties. . . . This suggests the human emotion behind the literary artifice. The desire is not so much to deromanticize the romantic classic . . . as to make a new romance in which somebody more like you does the romancing. What bugs the rewriters is the unchallenged existence of somebody else's romantic narrative, the other guy's or girl's romance. . . . Naturally, we want to vote them off the island—and vote ourselves onto it. The impulse behind "The Wind Done Gone" is not to create the world as it was; it is to create a cinnamon Scarlett worthy of a cinnamon Rhett. (2001, 37–38)

While Mitchell's estate sued to try to prevent the publication of *The Wind Done Gone*, Gopnick applauds this notion of rewriting a story from your own point of view. In fact, he says, it's the only way to fill in missing gaps:

And why shouldn't we cast ourselves in the big parts, make literature into a kind of po-mo karaoke? . . . Writing always leaves something or someone out, after all, and those who have been excluded can reach for the pen and tell it for themselves. As you read this, it is already being rewritten from the point of view of the author's children, whose clamor for lunch is left unheard; the online programmers, whose agency in getting it to the office is left unseen; and the copy editor, who invisibly fixes its grammar while sighing at its small ironies. They have their stories, too. (37–38)

What Gopnick is arguing for, the retelling of stories from our own point of view, is, in fact, what Schank argues our minds do automatically. It just becomes clearer when someone puts it into print.

When I was a kid, growing up in a small rural farming community in Wisconsin, I used stories in this way to understand people who seemed very different from me. I wrote myself into stories, either literally, as I wrote my own comic books, or in my imagination, as I pictured myself as a character in the comic books I read. And so I would become a super-powered mutant, someone whose DNA was different from the rest of the world, someone whose genes made him powerful but also a freak. In these stories, I learned what it meant to not fit in, to be different from everybody else: "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Professor Charles Xavier. You're at my school for gifted . . . for

mutants. I solicit their admission so I may help them learn to deal with a world that hates and fears them" (Macchio 2000, 13). I became one of Xavier's X-Men, and I battled supervillains and also racism and bigotry, fighting to protect the same people who were disgusted by my difference.

The fact is, we need to be part of the story. We need to tell what we know. We need to use the word *I*. Living a narrative life means beginning with who you are. Telling your own story. Celebrating me. It's a beginning, a place from which to figure things out. It doesn't mean the whole world is focused on me, that I can't understand anything or care about anything except myself. It means I learn to understand and to care through the stories I hear and tell. I get to you through me. I'm in the story, and in the end, so are you.

Finding Your Way

The world is a hard place. It's full of crime and corruption. It's a place where teacher pay is low and business executive pay is obscenely high. The world is subject to violent terrorism, economic downturns, and ecological pollution. At the same time, our world can be so dazzling. Wake a half hour early some morning, and an orange glow will cut through the darkness as you rub your arms against the cool of the morning. Go to bed a half hour late and a glittering of stars will spot the dark blue of the night sky while crickets rattle your ears. Eat lunch with a friend. Watch a baby learning to laugh.

Sometimes the whirl and stress of our working lives makes us miss all this, both good and bad. We look no further than our desk or the next hour. In her book *The Working Life*, scholar Joanne Ciulla (2000) discusses the problem:

One of the great ironies of modern life is that we live longer but we seem to have less time, because we have more things to do. In her book *The Overworked American*, economist Juliet Schor describes how work hours have been increasing over the past twenty years while leisure and vacation time have decreased. According to her estimates, the average employed person in America worked 163 hours more in 1987 than in 1969. Women average 305 more hours of work than they did in 1969. The amount of free time fell nearly 40 percent since 1973, from twenty-six hours a week to slightly under seventeen . . . downsizing often forces workers to put in longer hours, and few complain to their bosses, because they fear losing their jobs. (171)

Ciulla explores the many pressures of working life, particularly the shift of income away from workers and toward executives and alterations in business economics that have made management manipulation and downsizing routine. In the face of the depressing nature of the business world, Ciulla says,

"The way we think about work, leisure, and the way we live depends on how we see the big picture of life. On a day-to-day basis most of us deal with decisions about our lives ad hoc, sometimes losing sight of what is important to us. We know that work can make life miserable or rewarding" (207). She says we are faced with answering for ourselves what the meaning of life is and how that meaning impacts our work life: "meaningful work is something that we have to find on our own" (226).

Ciulla, of course, does not offer any simple answers to such grand questions. Nor will I. But I do believe that leading a narrative life can help us find our way. In this chapter, I've taken you back to when I was a little boy busily reading a sign that said, "COMIC BOOKS FOR SALE—ONLY 5 CENTS." I've explored how narratives can teach you about yourself, how they can preserve your past, how they can sensitize you to the stories of others, and how they can focus your understanding of the world from a personal vantage point. But there is one more thing stories can do.

I'm out for a walk one day late in September. There are leaves in the street and I'm wearing a jean jacket to keep off the cold. But I can feel the sun starting to warm things up, and so I'm walking quickly, headed to the first big hill on First Street. And then I see a "Garage Sale" sign with a red arrow pointing down a side street. I'm ahead of schedule anyway, so I follow the sign.

The garage and the driveway of a yellow house are loaded with stuff. There's an old couch and a few lamps, a stair-climbing machine, and some toys. A rope strung from two highchair backs holds hangers with dresses and shirts. Some boxes are filled with odds and ends. There's even a stereo with a turntable and an eight-track cassette player.

I spend some time looking around. A few people are browsing. One woman is haggling over the price of a round wooden mirror on a two-foot stand. I examine a push lawnmower, but it is old and dirty and doesn't look to have many lawns left in it.

Then I make my way into the garage by stepping over a pile of old tools and a red rake leaning on a garbage can. The garage is dark and there are more boxes here with clothes and kitchen gadgets, a toaster and a blender and a coffeemaker, cups and plates and silverware. Someone has sorted through his or her life, clearing out the junk, getting a fresh start.

In the back of the garage, I find what I'm looking for: two tables piled with paperback books. I start to sort through them when I spot two young boys crouched just to the left of the books, digging through a box of comics.

"Just pick one," says the bigger boy.

"I can't pick," says a tiny boy in a gray Elmo T-shirt. "They're all so good."

"Come on, Phil; Dad's waiting for us."

Phil keeps flipping through the books. A stack of seven or eight comics has been placed to his side. He adds two more to it.

"Phil! Come on."

Phil's brother has his comic in his hand, *Moon Knight*, the hero darting across a rain-swept building in his black and silver costume, his cape billowing behind him.

I squat down beside the two young boys. "Anything good in here?" I ask.

"Yeah," says the older boy. "There's loads of good stuff." Then he leans closer to me and whispers, "Don't tell anybody, but this *Moon Knight* is worth four dollars in my collector's guide."

"Really?" I say. "Better not bend the cover." I turn to the other boy, then, Phil: "What are you buying?" I ask him.

"I can't decide."

"What about Batman? He's a pretty cool hero."

"I have some of him already. There are too many. I can't pick."

"Hmmm," I say. And then I know what to do. I reach into my pocket and get out my wallet. "You know what?" I say. "This does look like a really good box of comics. So here's what we're going to do." I hand the older boy a twenty-dollar bill. "That ought to be enough for the whole box. You guys can split them. But let Phil have the first pick."

Both boys stare at me.

"Here," I say. "Tell your dad somebody bought me a box of comics once too."

"Wow," says Phil.

They both thank me and the two of them drag the box toward the front of the garage. I walk out a side door, tell an older woman in a lawn chair to have a nice day, and head back to the street and my walk up the hill.

I believe that stories can guide us. Certainly, they can help us figure out right from wrong. But the stories don't have to be religious in nature. Sometimes, all we need is to remember the story of someone's good deed, someone's act of kindness. That's what happened to me that fall day.

I think, as well, stories can help us when we truly aren't sure which way to go at all. When we feel the most lost and confused. Consider this: During the Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien is trapped in a firefight above a field that turns out to be a village's outdoor sewer (since the village has no indoor plumbing). It is raining while the soldiers are being shelled, and the field below them turns to swampy quicksand. O'Brien's friend, Kiowa gets sucked

into the swamp, and though O'Brien tries to save him, Kiowa is pulled under and dies. O'Brien blames himself for not having the courage and strength to save Kiowa. Few of us can imagine how we would cope with such a tragedy. We're fortunate to be spared that. But O'Brien had to find a way to move on. For him, stories became the answer. Stories helped him find his way again:

I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet when I received Norman Bowker's letter, it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse. By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain. (1990c, 179-80)

Stories help O'Brien keep going, past the devastation of war and loss. He uses them to save himself and to save, as well, the friend he couldn't save in life.

To live the narrative life, then, is to open yourself up to the possibilities of stories, to give yourself over to them, to trust them. Stories are a kind of magic. Simple magic, really, but magic all the same. If we tell our own stories, preserve them, study them, we can find in our stories some of the answers for which we're looking. I'm sure not every war veteran can face the horrors of war through stories, but it's clear stories have helped O'Brien. And I'm certain many other soldiers, and other people, have been helped by stories as well.

Ruota's Graveyard

At the back of the graveyard we find the pictures of Alesandro Francini and Annunziata Barsochi. Small round frames, the pictures yellowed by years of Tuscan sun. The Italians mark their dead this way. Not just a name and a date, but a real face, my great-grandmother's, her skin white and wrinkled, a black bonnet wrapping her head, and eyes that did not see their way down from this Pisa mountain.

Ruota's graveyard is at the edge of the village. A gray stone path at the side of the church leads to it. The graveyard is on a hill, 36 feet by 60 feet, about the size of a small backyard. A low stone wall surrounds the place, and the gate is held open by an old piece of red string. Inside, the graves sit neatly on either side of a thin concrete walkway. There is a small shed, as well, in the middle, with a padlocked door and a couple of rusty buckets. On the left side of the shed, slabs of marble, two or three to a stack, are propped up. They are not needed yet.

"Here's another 'Pagnucci,'" my wife calls to me. "Bar-la-mi-no. He was born in 1875."

I walk over to her, read the headstone. Barlamino's wife was Eufemia Landini Pagnucci. She outlived him by 20 years. A small bunch of yellow flowers, still fresh, rests by her name.

"And this must have been their daughter. Michelle." My wife, Edel, points at the next grave, a black-and-white stone, and the letters still a bright gold.

From Ruota's graveyard, on a hilltop in Northern Italy, the view east is of small towns with bright roofs. I try to make out the places I know: Luca, Altopascio, Castel Vecchio. But everything looks the same. Miles of open grass and winding roads, fields of sunflowers, and the orange tops of Italian homes.

The wind blows Edel's hair as we stand looking. To the south it is all trees, evergreens mostly, and I point out the spot where my grandfather still owns land, just up a ways from the road.

We have begun recording the names in a little notebook:

Margarita Pagnucci
 Angelo Pagnucci
 Carola Pagnucci Natali
 Francesco Natali
 Luigi Natali
 Luigi Mei
 Eni Barsochi
 Vincenza Mei

"They're all related," I say, waving my hand at the whole graveyard.

"Just a few more rows here to write down," says Edel, "and that corner by the gate. We started over there, by your uncles, remember?"

"Alright then, but we won't take down all these Guerras. Tommaso, here, he only married a Mei. It looks like the rest of his family didn't mix with mine."

I leave Edel writing down the names and walk over by the shed. One of the marble slabs is cracked, and I see that it is not a blank headstone, as I had thought, but already carved. I move the cracked slab to look, and they are all old headstones, the writing faded but still legible. There is no room for them, I guess, these stones. It is a small graveyard after all, and crowded. On the ground behind the shed I find another tombstone in the grass, but this one is so worn I cannot read it.

Eventually we get them all. All the Mei sisters who married Paolinis and Lupettis and Barsochis. Romolo Pagnucci, who was a priest. Carolina Mei

Pagnucci, my other great-grandmother. Her husband, Francesco, who died in 1949.

We take pictures of the pictures. We straighten the flowers, tossing the dead ones in a corner. We find an old candle, half melted. We put it on top of the largest headstone in the place, Erina Di Ercole's, and Edel finds a match in her bag. The candle flickers for a bit, but there is too much wind, so eventually we give up on the idea.

Then two Italian women come walking up the church path. One is carrying a garden spade. The older woman says something to us, but we don't understand.

"Americani?" she asks.

We nod.

The women have come to tend things. So we pick up our bags and the list of names and leave the graveyard, on a hillside, in the sunlight.

Your Mother

Imagine

if she *didn't* tell long stories
about your childhood

or hug you
every time she saw you

or cry
at weddings

or mail you
boxes of candies
that have been *hand* stamped with love

or forget
who likes Texas sheet cake
and who *hates* it

or tell you
she's *sure* having fun

or make you
do the dishes and clean the house

or
had joined the Peace Corps
instead of marrying your father
because he sat with his tie
in his coffee cup
and made her *laugh*.