

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the uses of story through a literature review using three lenses, an action research project, and what Nash calls a “scholarly personal narrative” (2004). I examine, through participatory action research, how the act of creating a self-narrative can help build authentic voice in adolescents. I also explore the ways in which one child uses story to scaffold her identity formation. Finally, the thesis includes my own reflection on the process.

### **Methodology**

The bulk of this thesis is contained in chapters 3-5. Chapter three, the literature review, looks at stories through lenses: in social justice work, as fundamentally human, and in identity. Each lens includes several close readings as well as my response. Because the question of how humans use stories is such a large one, of necessity my literature is also large; I examined a wide variety of texts in order to understand these uses and their contexts. It was particularly important to me to look closely at the ways stories are formative in identity, as the two subsequent chapters are heavily focused on identity. Chapter four is a close examination of how one child uses stories to scaffold her own identity formation; I also delve a bit into the uses of children’s books. I received permission from her mother to study the child in this chapter. We have a longstanding relationship: I have taken care of her most of her life, and we spent many hours a week together. In many ways she thinks of me as a third parent. This allowed me excellent access to her internal world and many opportunities to observe her. The data and anecdotes reflected in this chapter were collected over a period of several months. I used observation and videotape of the child to collect her stories. Chapter five is my action research project, which this methodology chapter is

primarily devoted to. In designing this research, I wanted to bring together a handful of adolescents to work on a writing project that would help them create their own self-narrative. I reached out to a variety of sources, including teachers, a children's literature listserv, and a facebook group based on the popular Nerdfighters concept originating from author John Green. In the end, though, I was left with five people with whom I had previous relationships: all were in a youth group I ran at a Unitarian Universalist church. They are (all chose pseudonyms):

*Terence:* a senior in high school. I taught his religious education classes when he was in grades 8, 10, and 11, and we have worked together on childcare; he has also gone on several trips that I ran. He lives with his mother, father, and younger sister.

*Amelia:* a college freshman. I taught her religious education class in grades 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12; worked with her on her 9<sup>th</sup> grade Coming of Age speech, ceremony and Boston pilgrimage; worked with her on the high school theater troupe she founded; worked with her on her 12<sup>th</sup> grade ceremony; and she attended multiple trips that I ran. Amelia lives at her public university and comes home frequently to visit her divorced mothers and younger sister.

*Adeline:* a senior in high school. I taught her religious education classes in grades 10-11, worked with her on childcare, and she has attended trips that I ran. Adeline lives with her mother, father, one older sister, and two younger sisters. She attends a well regarded Montgomery County Public School.

*John:* a sophomore in high school. He has attended multiple trips that I ran, including a trip to Boston for 9<sup>th</sup> graders; I also worked with him on his 9<sup>th</sup> grade Coming of Age speech and ceremony. He lives with his mother and father; his older brother is a freshman at a nearby college. He attends a Montgomery County Public School.

*Paige:* a college freshman. I taught her religious education class in grades 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 and

12; worked with her on her 9<sup>th</sup> grade Coming of Age speech, ceremony and Boston pilgrimage; worked with her on her 12<sup>th</sup> grade ceremony; and she attended multiple trips that I ran. Paige lives at her private liberal arts college and comes home infrequently to visit her mother, father and younger sister.

There were myriad advantages to having participants that I knew reasonably well. The most important is that we already had a level of trust—in some cases a very deep level—and so we didn't have to build that in; the participants could be more honest right from the beginning. Our preexisting trust meant that they were willing to try these assignments simply because I asked. Additionally, I had much greater context for their work. When I read their pieces, I often knew the siblings, friends, boyfriends they were talking about, and it helped me to see what might be behind their writing. The downside was that my preexisting relationships with these students did not give me a very good idea of how students with whom I had no relationship would respond to this protocol and whether they could be helped to build authentic voice using this kind of project.

The steps I took to create the project were as follows:

After gathering the participants, I created a Facebook group called What's Your Story to facilitate easy communication. I used that group to message all the participants at once and posted assignments on the Facebook wall. I then decided what I wanted my group to write about. Some, such as "where I come from" and "friendships" felt obvious, but I also wanted to offer them a chance to write about topics they might not think to—hence "doctors," and "bodies." Once I knew the overarching concept, I hunted around in my library and on the internet for prompts, trying to choose a snippet from a young adult novel and a poem for each prompt. These prompts had several uses: I wanted to expose the participants to new and different poetry and prose, give them a vague template to follow if needed, and just offer a little inspiration. The participants would send me their responses roughly every two

weeks. After they had submitted assignments one through eight—everything up to revisions—I sent each of them back a response letter. I also, with permission, began posting some of the stories on the facebook page about halfway through the project.

My data collection was originally done through SurveyMonkey. I chose questions, most answered on a 1-10 scale, that would tell me if they enjoyed the process and the prompts, if the prompts helped them, and if they felt their writing was more authentic in my process than in other writing. However, a wrench was thrown into the works when SurveyMonkey changed their site and I could no longer access the same metrics I had been using. Thus the first few assignments feature a standard set of data after each response, quantifying how the participant felt about that piece and prompts. After that, I stopped using the survey because the data collected changes rendered it essentially useless. Instead, I spoke to the participants and asked them questions to understand how they had experienced the project.

The primary goal of the project was to understand whether and how the writing of adolescent memoir helps teenagers to build authentic voice. Every two weeks I provided them with inspiration in the form of novel excerpts and/or poetry, followed by a writing prompt; in reference to the self-event hypothesis discussed in the literature review, these prompts were based largely on life events, periods of time or important relationships. The participants were free to respond using poetry, prose or a combination. The survey that I used at first comes out of a discussion we had on Facebook, in which I asked them to consider the question of authenticity in their writing. One participant noted that “Schools tend to change our voice to be more appropriate...I feel like if you read multiple student papers, they would have a very similar voice, if there is even an apparent voice. It’s risky, in school, to have an authentic teenage voice and get a good grade.” Another student echoed her, saying “I definitely think that’s true...there might be a few teachers who encourage

otherwise but most are really strict. One test [of authenticity] might be if a reader who knows could identify the papers to be ours—if they sound like us.”

I chose action research because, as Johnson points out, as a methodology it can help “fill in the gap between theory and practice...[and]empower teachers to become agents of change” (2008, p. 32). Action research is systematic and rigorous and begins without an answer: the researcher designs a study to adequately address a question or concern (Johnson 2008 p. 29). In addition, action researchers position themselves in the work, thus giving it personal and professional implications that a more traditional research project would not. Action research, for me, was a way of engaging in the world and with the essential question of how humans use stories.

The scholarly personal narrative is woven throughout this project. It is most explicit in the narrative created when I took part in the action research, answering the same prompts I gave my students. However, my own voice is heard clearly in the literature review and in my responses and evaluations of each student’s work as well. Nash writes persuasively that personal narratives have an important role to play in scholarly work: among other things, “discovering objective truths” is nearly impossible when we are “constantly distorting them with our narrative truths” (2004 p. 38). For anyone who comes from a more traditional academic background, the idea of inserting “I” into what is supposed to be academic work can feel forbidden, even scary. Nash, however, encourages us to write these personal narratives anyway: “to write a creative personal narrative in a professional school so that it enlarges, rather than undermines, the conventional canons of scholarship, is in my opinion, to transform the academy and the world” (2004 p. 22). My work is not going to transform the academy, but it was a fundamentally transformative experience to write it, and in ways perhaps small but not insignificant I believe it was transformative for my students.

## Chapter One: The Many Uses of Narrative

### Introduction

In this literature review, I examine the uses of stories in social justice, as fundamentally human, and in identity. For each lens, I used several books that addressed the specific question of how stories are and can be used in that context. The purpose of this literature review is to see what work scholars have done around these questions: how have researchers and writers addressed how people use narrative in these three categories?

In looking at how we develop narratives that frame our sense of identity, I wanted to begin at the beginning: with parents. Our sense of who we are and how we fit into the world begins with those who made us and those who raise us. In his tome *Far From The Tree*, Andrew Solomon uses the lens of how parents come to terms with atypical children to examine how identity is formed. Solomon focuses on children who have what he terms “horizontal identities”—which differ from “vertical identities,” those that, like race or religion, generally come down from parent to child. *Tree* is about what happens when parents have children with horizontal identities. It’s an apt term; so many of these parents seem at first flattened by the experience of having to raise a child who be experiencing something they’ve never even encountered. Solomon examines a great deal of these identities: his chapter list, bookmarked by essays about being a son and then a father, is as follows: deaf, dwarf, down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, disability, prodigies [musical only], rape [children conceived in], crime [the children are the criminals, not the parents] and transgender. What Solomon really wants to know is this: how on earth do parents love children who are, in many ways, so unlovable?

Of course, the children in the book are by no means unlovable—though some of

them are awfully unlikeable. What they are is different, sometimes so radically so that as a whole society has positioned them definitively as Other. Solomon's opening chapter, *Deaf*, helps to set up one of the overarching themes of his book: the value of diversity. I had a deaf student in my sex ed class for awhile, a fantastic whip-smart kid who had a cochlear implant and could read lips and spoke, once he was comfortable with us, of the discomfort he felt. He is not hearing, not really: if he turned off his hearing aids, his parents' yelling would have no effect. But he isn't completely deaf, either. Although he knows American Sign Language (ASL) and is fluent in it, he can converse with hearing people just fine, most of the time. He is caught in the struggle between the value of difference and the burden of the same. It's a struggle at the heart of *Tree*, and it is one easily exemplified in the deaf chapter, because *Deaf*—the capital letter indicates the culture rather than the condition—is a strong, capable and vocal culture, with its own schools and organizations and especially its own language. As Solomon explains, "According to the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, one of the cornerstones of sociolinguistics, your language determines the way you understand the world" (2012 p. 62). The development of ASL has been tremendously important for deaf people, some of whom argue that deaf children born to hearing parents should be given to deaf adults to raise. But although ASL is very much its own language—with a grammar and structure unique to it—it's very existence was questioned for generations. Even now, there is dispute amongst deaf and hearing alike about whether to implant deaf toddler with cochlears, which generally provide some hearing—but not the kind of hearing most people are thinking of, and the risks are not yet fully understood. As Solomon points out, though, "The cochlear implant debate is really a holding mechanism for a larger debate about assimilation versus alienation, about the extent to which standardizing human populations is a laudable mark of progress, and the extent to which it is a poorly whitewashed eugenics" (2012 p. 112). This question, of at what price fixing and is it really

fixing, finds its parallel with the process undergone by some dwarf children, in which their limbs are repeatedly broken and lengthened, leading to a pain-filled adolescence and multiple surgeries—and eventually, more normative height. It sounds horrific on the page and yet Solomon reports that many dwarfs do not regret having had the procedure. But because the science is moving so much faster than the ethics, it is impossible to know whether a parent is making the right decision; as Solomon puts it, "The trick is knowing which prejudices of a nine year old are nine year old prejudices and which ones are true readings of the heart that will last into adulthood"(2012 p. 163). Good luck puzzling that one out; no parent really has any idea of which of her nine year olds' traits will survive fully intact into adulthood.

Parents whose children have Downs Syndrome find that it "may be an identity or a catastrophe or both; it may be something to cherish or something to eradicate; it may be rich and rewarding both for those whom it affects directly and for those who care for them; it may be a barren and exhausting enterprise; it may be a blend of all of those"(2012 p. 190). Parents with children on the autism spectrum find much of the same thing, as do parents whose children have disabilities—though the picture, never exactly clear, becomes more complicated as the children gets sicker. Solomon tells the story of a woman who could not face the idea of caring for her daughter, who had what a doctor called "no intelligence" and would almost certainly never walk or talk; the child was fostered out. Another family arranged for their severely disabled child, who would never walk or talk, to have a hysterectomy and a mastectomy, so that her parents would be able to carry her around more easily. Solomon gets to the heart of the matter in stating that all relationships contain ambivalence. Perhaps that ambivalence is never so notable as when a parent is unsure whether her child loves her at all—and whether she is capable of reciprocating a love that may or may not be present.

Our first identities come from our parents. They come from the ways in which we, as



helpless creatures, observe our parents mirroring our actions and our emotions. They come from the responses we receive from those we are attached to. As the famous child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott explains in his classic text *Playing and Reality*, “there is no possibility whatever for an infant to proceed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle...unless there is a good enough mother...[who makes] active adaptation[s]...to [help the child] tolerate the results of frustration” (1971 p. 13-14). In other words, a mother—or another parent or caregiver--has to first prove to the infant that the world is a completely safe place and under the baby’s magical control before she can begin to gently disillusion the child. Without that first foundational but utterly unconscious understanding of the world as fundamentally safe, children will always feel vaguely uneasy; they may—and many will—function well and be happy anyway, and competent parenting, for example for children who are adopted after traumatic infancies, can do a great deal to mitigate it. There will always be a shadow for children who, for whatever reason, do not have that understanding as infants.

For all parents and for all children identity is a complex, multi-faceted thing. There is probably not a child on earth who doesn’t regret some of what his parents did. There is probably not a parent on earth who doesn’t regret the same. And yet we must make peace, however fragile it may sometimes be, with that. For parents with children whose identities are so completely disparate, this peace is perhaps especially hard to capture.

Many years ago, I read a memoir of chronic, severe depression in which the writer quoted the poet Jane Kenyon. The only part of the poem that I remember—the part that still echoes in my head, years later—is this: God does not leave us comfortless/ so let evening come” (Kenyon, 1990). I don’t really believe this (I’m a Unitarian Universalist, so I don’t have to believe in god, and also, I am allowed to change my mind about the whole thing on a daily basis). The comedian Tig Notaro says, speaking to *The New Yorker* of a short

period in which she was hospitalized with a horrific infection, her mother died, her girlfriend broke up with her and she was diagnosed with breast cancer, that she just kept hearing that cliché, and she just kept “picturing God going, ‘You know what? I think she can take a little more.’” (Marantz pp. 5). Reading Solomon’s work, though, is a piercing reminder that there is almost always just a little more, and also that we get used to anything. He quotes mother Lisa Hedley, whose child is a dwarf and who tells the story of stepping into an elevator at Johns Hopkins Hospital with a mother who had a child with Downs. - "I was looking at her with total pity, like 'oh I can deal with mine but I would not know what to do with yours' and that was exactly how she was looking at me" (124).

I have little patience for the mawkish sentiment that all suffering leads to greater awareness. In her book *Bright-Sided*, journalist Barbara Enrenreich examines the idea of positive thinking as curative. Enrenreich, who had breast cancer, talks about the pervasive belief that getting cancer was somehow a good thing. As Enrenreich discovered, this relentless focus on positivity actually meant that she, and other patients, didn’t have a chance to think critically about treatment options—which in the world of cancer, where chemo can hurt as much as heal, is critical.. It is tantalizing to believe that there is always deeper meaning in suffering. This is entirely understandable and I feel it too--but sometimes things just happen. Oftentimes it does not make us stronger or better or wiser. Some things are not fair and some things never will be, and there is peace in acknowledging that. And yet, Solomon’s book may be the most conclusive evidence I’ve read that, while tragedies with happy endings—like the birth of a child whose identity is utterly foreign to you and whose very existence is a battle--may be “sentimental tripe” they may also be “the true meaning of love” (2012 p. 701).

Our identity is tied to that of our parents, and to that of the people to whom we form primary attachments. We get our first inkling of ourselves as separate when we are still tiny

and still dependent, and we continue to grow as separate beings, continue to form our own identities. It is through the examination of children whose identities are so radically different from their parents as to be almost unimaginable that Andrew Solomon is able to find threads of his own identity. It is through reading about these families that I saw echoes of my identity and that of my parents. I thought, as I dove deeper and deeper into the pages, how strange and yet how familiar I must have seemed to my parents: how both would understand my depression but neither how it lured me into self-destruction; how my father would know my love of books and my mother my love of babies as they knew their heartbeats, and how my manifestation would always differ just enough to be slightly foreign. Perhaps this is the nature of being in relationship with someone you have helped to create, always utterly familiar and at once completely strange.

In his *New Yorker* review of Solomon's book, Nathan Heller writes that the word identity has come to mean differentiation; partly this is because of Erik Erikson, who, Heller explains, "used "identity" to mean a balance between one's sense of self—one's sense of personal continuity—and the expectations of one's community" (2012 pp. 17). This is the fundamental tension of identity: the interplay between Self and Other. Winnicott, the psychoanalyst, talked a lot about how therapy happens in the area where the child's play and the therapist's play meet; when the child is not able to play, then the work becomes allowing that (p. 51). Playing has a space and a time, Winnicott says, and it is inherently creative. It exists in a strange netherworld: it "is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world"(p. 69). Play can be said, Winnicott wrote, to exist in the same place as does cultural experience: "the potential space between the individual and the environment" (p. 135). I think stories reside there as well, in this space created between ourselves, others, and the context in which all exist.

## **Bearing Witness: Narratives in Social Justice**

As someone who identifies strongly with progressive education, I felt a responsibility to examine the use of stories in social justice work. As we will see in subsequent chapters, narrative of all forms—drawings, poems, myths and legends—have always been part of human culture. Some of the most interesting pieces of narrative come from people who are outside of the dominant paradigm of their time, and these narratives can be especially important in social justice.

In their book about using narrative in social justice work, Maynes, Pierce and Laslett explain that stories can be used in this arena in ways that are markedly different from the ways that we usually understand history. Stories help to build connections between the individual and the collective; they are “infused with notions of temporal causality that link an individual life with stories about the collective destiny”(2008 p. 3). In other words, personal narratives help us to make sense of history by helping individuals to understand their place within it. These narratives, used in the context of explicating history, are about the interaction of history with personal experience and vice versa, and the connections between the individual and the social—just as Winnocott posits that play is.

A definition is important here. Maynes et al define this particular kind of narrative as a “retrospective first person account of the evolution of an individual over time and in social context” (2008 p. 4). So the narrative that helps us to understand history is not merely memoir or autobiography; it is a very specific kind of memoir that tracks personal growth—and, potentially, weakening—within the larger societal context. The authors suggest that these narratives are particularly valuable in class, race, gender and labor analyses and as a source of counter narratives. They say that “the power of the analyses results from bringing

new voices and previously untold stories into conversations on topics about which these voices provide invaluable witness...[they] bring to light suppressed histories” (2008 p. 7-8). The authors also discuss the idea that narratives are written by those with agency, and they quote the Anthony Giddens idea that having agency means that a social actor could in any situation “have acted differently” (2008 p. 22). As the authors discuss, this raises some important questions about resources and privilege; what social actor has the resources and privilege in a given situation to be able to act differently? My thesis will be partially about the ways in which adolescents can use narrative to understand their own personal histories, and one of the things that inevitably arises in that self-examination is the question of when one had agency. This is, therefore, a useful definition: it gives us a practical framework with which to structure our understanding of our own power.

In her book *Storytelling for Social Justice*, Lee Ann Bell talks about using stories as a vehicle for understanding power with regards to race and class, especially. Using the definition of privilege as a system that operates on multiple levels and has been around for long enough that business as usual sustains it, she explains that awareness of this privilege varies widely and that we can use stories in the classroom to further this awareness and to transform it into progress. Stories are analytic tools, and storytelling, unlike many methods, is free, available, and requires no education or wealth (Bell 2010 p. 16). In addressing race and class in particular, she explains, stories are useful because they “operate on individual and collective levels...[they]help us connect individual experiences with systemic analysis, allowing us to unpack in ways that are...more accessible than abstract analysis alone, racism’s hold on us”( p. 16). Because these narratives make personal that which is also highly political, and that which is highly charged, they are perhaps of extra importance.

Bell discusses four kinds of stories used in her programs (which can take place either

in the classroom or in teacher training workshops): stock, concealed, resistance and emerging/transforming stories. Stock stories are collective, sometimes expressed in the idea of color blindness or a post-racial society; a stockpile of stories is created so that testimony is there when white folks need it. This is especially true of affirmative action stories, Bell says; many people will tell themselves that they didn't get into Harvard/Yale/Ivy League Du Jour because a black student did. As Bell puts it, stock stories provide an excuse for the kinds of tales that begin with "I'm not racist, but..." Because they are so deeply rooted in American culture, those who challenge stock stories may be viewed as crazy. Whites are usually unaware of counter narratives that exist in black communities. Blacks, and white progressives, can destabilize these narratives, of which the American dream is an especially pervasive example.

Concealed stories are, as the name implies, just below the surface. They offer narratives and examples of hardships and strengths of non-dominant groups, and we sometimes juxtapose stock stories in history with concealed ones—the latter are often more interesting in addition to being more accurate. These stories validate students of color and help white students to come to terms with their—our—own history and its failings. (CITE)

Resistance stories are those narrative examinations of the ways in which people have organized for change. One important distinction Bell makes is resistance for liberation versus resistance for survival. The former is what leads to long, lasting change, while the latter—while still important—doesn't lead to anything beyond any basic everyday survival. Only resistance for liberation moves a group into a space that may be genuinely transformative. These are the stories that can be studied for tactics.

Finally, emerging/transforming stories are those that are created specifically to go up against stock stories. Participants in Bell's workshops often create their own stories that offer more honest, authentic and historically accurate counter narratives to these stock stories.

This creation of emerging/transforming stories strikes me as one of the ways in which educators might assist students in taking charge of and understanding their own identities. Arguably, the telling of these stories on a deeply personal level is the work of adolescence.

Narratives in the strictest sense are not the only use of story that can be used for social justice; poetry is another, possibly even more powerful vehicle for this work. In her anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, editor Carolyn Forché argues that in poetry the personal must be made political. She suggests that by splitting poetry—and, I would argue, all narrative—into such simplistic categories, we “give the political both too much and too little scope....the personal too important and not important enough” (1993 p. 31). Instead, she suggests, let us create a “social space” for this kind of poetry of witness, which as Americans we are lucky enough to be in a position to create: as Forché points out, our wars are fought in other places (31). It is not our buildings bombed, our children gassed, our citizens not allowed to scribble honest letters to the editor or post whatever we’d like on social media. We have arguably more freedom to create and to spread this poetry of witness. Forché’s book is a devastating, triumphant compendium of work from poets spanning all of the major tragedies of the previous century, beginning with the genocide in Armenia and ending, multiple heartbreaks later, with the revolution in China. Along the way the poems paint brutal, unflinching portraits of life in two world wars, almost countless repressive regimes, more than one genocide, various mass murders, a few proxy wars, civil rights struggles....it is a full, or nearly full, examination of the battles for basic human rights that chased the 20<sup>th</sup> century like a rabid dog.

The poetry within, though, provides several important clues about the ways in which such work can be used for social justice. I have divided the poems I will use as exemplars into two categories. Although both could arguably be activist poems whether or not that is the author’s intent—about which more later—one type of poem gets to that using

descriptors of the horror the poet is witnessing. They may do this very literally, as in these lines from Turkism Armenian poet Siamanto:

...With a torch, they set  
 The naked brides on fire.  
 And the charred bodies rolled  
 And tumbled to their deaths...  
 I slammed the shutters  
 Of my windows,  
 And went over to the dead girl  
 And asked: 'How can I dig out my eyes?' ("The Dance", 59-66)

Perhaps they will describe the machinery of war instead, as Soviet poet Victor Serge does here:

We were born  
 In the time of the first perfected machine guns;  
 They were waiting for us, these excellent perforators  
 Of armor plate and brains haunted by spirituality... ("Dialectic" 1-4)

Or, as Auden did when writing about the Spanish civil war, these poems will evoke the senses: "...The unmentionable odour of death/Offends the September night." (September 1, 1939, 10-11).

They may make the horror of the poem all the more blatant and unsettling by using a simple, childlike rhyming scheme, the sort favored by Dr. Seuss, as in this part of Hecht's WWII work *More Light! More Light!*:

We move now to outside a German wood.  
 Three men are there commanded to dig a hole  
 In which two Jews are ordered to lie down  
 And to be buried alive by a third, who is a Pole. (13-16)

Miklós Radnóti's eerie *Picture Postcards* includes what is essentially a preview of his own death; he was shot after a forced march in 1944, in Hungary, with poems including the below in his pockets (Forché 1993 p. 368):

I fell beside him; his body turned over,  
 Already taut as a string about to snap.



Shot in the back of the neck. That's how you too will end,  
 I whispered to myself; just lie quietly.  
 Patience now flowers into death.  
*Der springt noch auf*, a voice said above me.  
 On my ear, blood dried, mixed with filth (1-7)

The Holocaust provided much sickeningly rich imagery, including, from Primo Levi, the image of the smoke rising from what we can know with history's dreadful clarity were the crematoria: "Torn feet and cursed earth/the long line the gray morning. The Buna smokes from a thousand chimneys,..." ("Buna" 1-3). Later, writing of the titular heads of state in "The Dictators", Neruda used the same sort of visceral imagery: "An odor has remained among the sugarcane:/a mixture of blood and body, a penetrating/petal that brings nausea..." (1-3). Similarly, of his time covering the Vietnam war, John Balaban wrote, brutally:

Dana Stone, in an odd moment of mercy,  
 sneaking off from the Green Beret assassins  
 to the boy they left for dead in the jungle.  
 Afraid of the pistol's report, Stone shut his eyes  
 And collapsed the kid's throat with a bayonet. ("The Guard at the Binh Thuy Bridge" 16-20)

Balaban's work nicely encapsulates this style: he is descriptive, captures the horrible choices made by soldiers in war, and if read by a civilian his work—like others discussed above—would no doubt capture some attention. Poetry is written, obviously, for many purposes, and I do not claim that any of the poems discussed are written solely, or even at all, as activist poems: that is, to call attention to what is happening to the writers and to their brethren. I have no idea what the authorial intent behind each work was and in many cases the writers are not around to ask. However, as we know from reader-response theory, literature does not exist in a vacuum, solely in the mind of the creator: it exists in the shared space where reader and writer meet. Therefore it seems reasonable to expect that poetry such as the above—poetry which offers primarily a *descriptive* way of looking at a horrific event, poetry which invites the reader to view the genocide or war or repression from the

author's point of view—can be used for social justice work. We have seen in recent years, for example, that the rise of gay people who are out has increased support for gay marriage. This is because it is much, much harder to support discrimination when it is directed at someone you know and when you can see the effects. A similar theory might come into play here. The closer people who do not directly see the effects of whatever new horror modern technology and ancient pathology have wrought can come, the more real it is to us.

These are the most obvious poems of witness, and they are powerful and they matter. The second kind, though, is even more direct in that it speaks to the reader with a kind of condemnation or bitterness, rather than a description of horrors. The most famous example is likely anti-war poet Wilfred Owen's WWI work "Dulce et Decorum Est", the last stanza of which reads:

If in some smother's dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sack of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori. (17-28)

The Latin in the poem translates roughly to "it is sweet and right to die for your country." This is perhaps the best of the anti-war poems, the most deeply descriptive and the most cutting, with the way Owen speaks to us as friends before suggesting that we are sending children to an absurd, unnecessary death, based on some stupid Latin cliché, just because the kids want to do something brave. But he is joined by a number of fine poets who find their collective voice in their expression of rage. e.e. cummings, always a master of language, writes "(i sing of Olaf glad and big)": "...whose warmest heart recoiled at war:..."

his wellbeloved colonel.../...took erring Olaf soon in hand;/...[Olaf] responds, without getting annoyed/"I will not kiss your f.ing flag" (3, 5, 18-19). Cumming's bitterness and disillusionment are leaching out of the poem, amplified rather than diluted by his acerbic tone. Similarly, in the closing stanza of "The Stalin Epigram" Osip Mandelstam writes of the titular dictator "He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries./He wishes he could hug them like big friends from home." (15-16).

The humorous but biting attack on a kind of false patriotism is echoed in the WWII poem "Hymn of a Patriotic War Veteran", part of which reads:

...If there's wine in the Champagne region  
it's because I pissed there....  
I got rabbit punches in the ass  
I was blinded by goat turds  
Asphyxiated by my horse's dung  
Then they gave me the Cross of Honor (Péret 13-16)

In Edith Brück's agonizing poem "Pretty Soon"—which I am reprinting in whole for the full effect—humor comes as a sucker punch at the very end:

Pretty soon  
when people hear a quiz show expert  
talk about Auschwitz  
they'll ask themselves if they would have guessed  
that name  
they'll comment on the current champion  
who never gets dates wrong  
and always guesses the number of dead.  
Yawning sleepily  
they'll say maybe they would have preferred  
Greco-Roman history

to these Jews  
 who have always gotten themselves talked about:  
 they really attract persecution.

That last line comes at the reader like an attack, sudden and jolting and funny in a way that is so utterly startling that you can't help but laugh even as you shudder. The elegiac is married to the caustic for an effect that causes the reader to notice suddenly his or her own complicity in what Brück is discussing. Similarly, writing about dictatorship and repression in Guatemala in his poem "Apolitical Intellectuals," Otto Rene Castillo takes to task all of those who profess to be uninterested or somehow above that kind of turmoil:

One day  
 the apolitical  
 intellectuals...  
 Will be interrogated...  
     They will be asked  
 what they did  
 when their country was slowly  
 dying out...  
 They will be asked nothing  
 about their absurd  
 justifications  
 nurtured in the shadow  
 of a huge lie...  
     Apolitical intellectuals...  
 you will have nothing to say.  
     A vulture of silence  
 will eat your guts.  
 Your own misery  
 will gnaw at your souls.  
 And you will be mute  
 in your shame.

Although his piece lacks Brück's final jab to the solar plexus, Castillo's poem has the same contempt for the complicity of the everyday coconspirators. It also addresses the dynamics of power more directly, looking pointedly in the direction of those with more, those who can afford to sit around and discuss conflict and repression as a pure scholarly

exercise. In this well-earned hostility towards the intellectual class, he is joined by Langston Hughes, one of the great chroniclers of America's civil rights struggle, who in "Letter to the Academy" addressed the men of that institution directly:

.....But please—all you gentlemen with  
 beards who are so wise and old and who write better  
 than we do and whose souls have triumphed (in spite  
 of hungers and wars and the evils about you) and  
 whose books have soared in calmness and beauty aloof  
 from the struggle to the library shelves and the desks  
 of students and who are classics—come forward  
 and speak upon

The subject of the Revolution.

We want to know what in the hell you'd say?

Hughes finds his rage here, tempered a bit more than Cummings earlier, or than Brück, but there nonetheless. Like the other poets I have pulled as examples of this style, he is speaking not to draw the reader into his *experience* but to draw the reader into his *rage*. Poet Denise Levertov made this rage explicit in her 1972 work "Fragrance of Life, Odor of Death", written at the height of the Vietnam War:

all the while among  
 the rubble even, and in  
 the hospitals, among the wounded,  
   not only beneath  
   lofty clouds  
  
   in temples  
   by the shores of lotus-dreaming  
   lakes

a fragrance:  
 flowers, incense, the earth-mist rising  
 of mild daybreak in the delta—good smell  
 of life.

It's in America  
 where no bombs ever  
 have screamed down smashing  
 the buildings, shredding the people's bodies,  
 tossing the fields of Kansas or Vermont or Maryland into

the air

to land wrong way up, a gash of earth-guts....  
it's in America, everywhere, a faint seepage,  
I smell death.

Hers may be the angriest poem, and part of me enjoys picturing the reaction, when it was published in the *Boston Globe*, of the hawks and the war-mongers. She is right, too, that we have not since the Civil War seen a battle fought in our own backyards, and this makes it harder for Americans to see the real cost of war. It was plainer in the first and second World Wars, when everyone had a son or brother fighting, and it was still relatively visible in Vietnam, when the draft remained in effect—though it became less so, with the ease with which the privileged could get deferments—but the days of a volunteer army staffed largely by kids without much of a voice, the rise of a Congress without children in uniform, means that Americans and their representatives don't tend to have much of a concrete sense of the true cost of war. It means that we have to rely even more on this kind of witnessing.

I went to Quaker high school, and I asked the principal of my school about that concept. He described it as “being there to watch someone do something so that...they [know] they aren't getting away with it...Witnessing is the silent (and Quaker) version of ‘I saw what you did’” (personal communication, October 6, 2013). The poems discussed above are all versions of that. They are testament to the power of being there to watch, to prove that whatever helps happens, *you were seen*. There is some power in that, some relief from the terrible truth that regardless of whether you were seen, you did it anyway. The first type of witnessing poem—the sort that relies more on description—provides a window into the experience for the reader. The second type provides a window into the rage of impotence against a power structure, a genocide, a war that the writer is caught up in. Either way, the poet is engaging in the act of witnessing. It is up to the reader, then, to decide what to do with that information.

The anthology's editor dispiritingly quotes Hitler's question—as she says, “posed to his military cabinet days before his invasion of Poland in 1939—‘Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?’” (Forché 1993 p. 55). Hitler was right, and he was right, too, that this ease of forgetting made his own path of destruction far too easy. But Forché is right, too. Poetry of witness helps to make the political personal again. It helps to make the personal political in a concrete way that it is impossible to ignore. It helps to cement it in the public imagination. These poems, and others like them, can and should be used in classrooms, as part of English and social studies curricula, as a way into the experience and into the rage of their creators. They should be used to remind of what of what the poet Wislawa Szymborska noted in “Children of the Epoch:”

...Whether you want it or not,  
 your genes have a political past,  
 your skin a political tone,  
 your eyes a political color,  
 What you say resounds,  
 What you don't say is also  
 Politically significant.... (6-12)

### **Stories to Find Myself: Narratives in Identity**

Authenticity in memoir is among the most central issue in the writing of any sort of autobiography. In his book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin frames it nicely when he asks “how much of what autobiographers say they experience is equivalent to what they really experience, and how much of it is merely what they know how to say?”(4). When we write memoir of any kind, we approach it, out of necessity, without empirical evidence but instead relying on our own infinity fallible memory. We may not know how to put words to all of the pieces we wish to knit together in our own personal narrative, and therefore, it may be lacking some of the most important components. Eakin quotes author Penelope Lively, who,

in the introduction of her memoir, talked about the ways in which her childhood perceptions could be “shared” with her adult self (qtd p. 2, p. 105). Lively, like all of us, has distant, fragmented memories of being a child; but through the process of writing she is able, as an adult, to be given new access to these perceptions. Writing about childhood is inherently challenging; it’s hard to string together a coherent narrative from a preverbal time. But as adults we can recognize our own fragments and thoughts and begin to knit them, slowly, into a larger tapestry.

Autobiography is, essentially, a study of self, and so it seems important at this juncture to understand at least a little about what self is. Eakin discusses the cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser on kinds of selves:

--ecological self—“self as perceived with respect to the physical environment” infants have this. (36, 22)

--interpersonal self—“self as engaged in immediate unreflective social interaction with another person?” Infants have this as well. (41,22)

--extended self—“self of memory and anticipation” 36, 23) children have around 3

--private self—“conscious experiences that are not available to anyone else” (50, 23) likely present before age5.

--conceptual self—“extremely diverse forms of self-information—social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person—that posit the self as category, either explicitly or implicitly “ (23)

These kinds of selves are important to understand as we look at the ways in which memoir and autobiography function and interact with memory. The ecological and interpersonal selves are both important and both fairly immediate. They are with us immediately; from the beginning, babies understand something of their environment and the



people around them. As they grow so does this understanding. The extended self is what we see in toddlers as they come to understand that we will go swimming after nap, that yesterday we had Popsicles, that tomorrow is when we go to preschool. The extended self seems to me to be about time, about the recognition that things happen in the future and in the past, and the delight and pain inherent in that. The private self, of course, is the self that is full of information that is mine and mine alone; only I can ever truly know its veracity. I think we can assume that this information might include not only my experiences but my feelings about them. Finally, the conceptual self is the ways that I think about myself. How do I frame my identity? What do I tell myself about my own systems and beliefs and values? Where do I find common ground with others who may have the same frames? This conceptual self is where much of the work of good personal narrative lies, although ideally one would incorporate all of these selves. But our own personal storytelling is partially about the creation of a conceptual self—about the synthesis of all of the frames (belief, values, personality, history) that we use to define ourselves, to position ourselves as Self, as I.

There is a way, Eakin posits, that the use of I at all is interesting: discussing the use of the first person in a Descartes essay, he notes that it becomes “split”—“I” he ends up discussing is his “existence as a “thinking substance” distinct from the body” (8). This is the I that we are using in autobiography: the I that is the conceptual self. However, Eakin also argues—persuasively—that this I has been too long divorced from the physical body, and that part of the task of really good memoir is to reintroduce body and mind. It’s primary purpose, though, is probably the creation of that conceptual self: “...narrative is deeply involved in the construction and maintenance of the extended self, that mode self-experience that we are socialized to recognize as identity’s core” (130). However, neither our identities nor our narratives come to us alone. Eakin calls this the myth of autonomy: the self is defined in part by how it is in relation to others and therefore can never exist wholly

alone (43). Our selves are, as Eakin says, relational; they exist, or parts of them do, like Winnicott's idea of playspace, in the elusive space between two selves.

Similarly, Eakin says, "we can think of the child's sense of self as emerging within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts" (117). Solomon showed us some of the ways that parents give us our first identities, and Eakin's work adds to that in his understanding that the stories our families tell are perhaps the first iteration of our own fragile identities.

In their book *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, the editors discuss McAdams' claim that "narrative identities function to organize and make more or less coherent a whole life, a life that otherwise might feel fragmented and diffuse" (2006 p. 5). For me, one of the challenges and gifts of this particular project is the possibility of a life less fragmented. But life stories are confusing and nonlinear, as Raggatt (2006) explains; no one's life story can be singularly captured in one monologue (15). A life story is "is really more like a *conversation of narrators* or perhaps a *war of historians* in your head"(p. 16) (emphasis original). This argument between selves in the creation of autobiography is arguably what makes for a richer text.

As Pals (2006) says, "...life story construction is an interpretative process of self-making that operates to produce coherence through the formation of meaningful connections between past experiences and the self"(177). Her research involved helping people to make causal connections in their "self-making" (178). The patterns these connections formed helped participants to see how they have changed, in ways that are both positive and negative (180). In other words, it is not only the explicit content between in life stories that provides important personal evidence but the links between content.

I have never heard of this before, but Gottschel explores the idea that people who suffer from depression tend to tell themselves less flattering lies--something that

psychologists consider unhealthy (174). Perhaps depression comes from the unraveling, or simple nonexistence, of a coherent life story. For me, certainly there is some truth to that; I have no real sense, and never have had, of my own history. It is hard to keep calm and steady in a world without the anchor of your own story.

Part of my thesis aims to look at the ways in which adolescent autobiography might help to build authentic voice. There hasn't been, as far as I have been able to determine, a tremendous amount of research into this particular arena. There has been a little, however. In one article, Pasupathi and Weeks write that one of the main things that is being asked of this age group is the task of "seeing themselves as the same person over time, and to build a sense of themselves that integrates their past and present" (2011 p. 32). This identity construction/formation is essentially the task, and part of the argument being made by these authors is that it must be "constructed rather than taken for granted" (p. 32). There are two facets of this construction or formation: finding yourself--"exploring different roles and ideologies"--and staying yourself "experience of, and belief in, one's continuity in identity over time" (p. 32). In the active construction of the self-narrative, then, these two facets may be in tension. One of the ways, the authors suggest, that people keep their sense of self is in making connections between experiences and their belief about what kind of person they are. Perhaps this is an effort to resolve this tension. The authors refer to this linkage as "self-event connections" and note that they are especially important in adolescence (p. 36). Among the more interesting concepts contained in this work was the importance of the listener, especially in early childhood. Children whose mothers--or, presumably, other caregivers--listen well can help their children learn to remember. They can help make sense of the story, reframing it, explaining how it fits into the child's past experiences and personality traits and what it might portend for the future. This can continue into adulthood. I did not have the kind of parents, at least not in memory, that were particularly skilled at

this, but I do have a therapist who is and who has known me since I was fifteen; she has often done this for me. It is invaluable, to have someone else to help you know your story.

## **Even Caveman Told Bedtime Stories: Narratives as Fundamentally Human**

### **Myths and the Beginning of Storytelling**

One of the most important aspects of my exploration of how people use stories is the realization of just how fundamentally *human* storytelling is. Scholar Karen Armstrong examines how myths and stories of all kinds became vital to our ancestors, and her exploration reveals some of the reasons stories are so important. Neanderthal graves, she explains, suggest some contemplation about death...they "show that when these early people became conscious of their mortality, they created some sort of counter narrative that enabled them to come to terms with it" (Armstrong 2006 p. 1) We have always tried to find patterns and meaning in narrative to ward off despair, unlike other animals (2). Neanderthal graves give us the following lessons about myth:

--they are a reaction to death

--myths are ritualistic

--they about that which we do not yet have any direct experience

--myth is about another reality that exists alongside our daily lived reality--sometimes called the world of the gods (4).

Metaphorically, of course, all narratives are about a secondary reality, a reality that sometimes takes primacy over the one which we live each day. We read and write fiction to help us understand the capriciousness of our mundane, sometimes electrifying existences.

We narrate our lives to tell a coherent story of that shadow world, the overarching story that brings meaning into our everyday.

In ancient storytelling traditions people talked of gods as "aspects of the mundane" (6). The gods were not something special, set apart; they were woven in. In contrast to today's more history-based understanding of myth, Armstrong explains, "when people wrote about the past they were more concerned with what an event had meant" (7).

Myth, argues Armstrong, is important in part because it allows adults to "play:" to imagine a different reality, to say "what if" and then to play that out to its logical conclusion (CITE) For our earliest ancestors, she posits, the Paleolithic people (20000 to 8000 BCE) mythology was every bit as important as what we think of as survival skills: evolving hunting methods and learning to manipulate the environment. For evidence and further examples Armstrong looks to indigenous hunting cultures, which she says scholars note have spirituality built into everyday life in a way quite discrete from everyday Americans. As Armstrong notes, the myth of a lost paradise is nearly universal, and stems from "a strong experience of the sacred" (15). For the Paleolithic, this world must have felt much closer, as everything was a spiritual act. Myths were supposed to, and did, encourage people to understand and participate fully in the divine all around them. The earliest mythologies, Armstrong notes, "taught people to see through the tangible world to a reality that seemed to embody *something else*" (16) (emphasis original). Today, we use myths more as metaphor. We no longer think of them as leading us to a reality.

When human beings moved, some ten thousand years ago, into the period in which agriculture was invented myths changed along with food sources. In many cultures, the soil was considered female, the seeds male, the comingling of the two akin to sex (53). It was, in myth and in reality, a frightening, violent struggle, as early humans fought against weather and land and the fickle nature of nature herself. Many of the myths that came about during

this period--best known is probably the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone--are about not only the growing of food but also, and inherently, death and life (56). When humanity moved forward into a more urban existence--this is 4000 to 800 BCE so we aren't talking Manhattan urban, but cities were beginning to exist--myths sprang up that reflected concern about this development. Given the current state of New York City, perhaps we should have listened. As Armstrong notes, the "first man to build a city was Cain, the first murderer" which hardly seems a strong recommendation for city life (60). Nonetheless, ancient people went on as they had always done, experiencing the divine right along with the mundane and creating myths to help capture their fear. This was true, Armstrong explains, in the flood myths of ancient Egypt (she writes that all of Mesopotamia feared invasion, which it seems they were right to do): floods were "a metaphor for political and social dissolution (63). However, this is also the period, Armstrong posits, in which the divine began their inexorable separation from the everyday reality of people. They were still far more tied together than we are today, but it was shifting as, in myth, the gods began to withdraw (64). Into this vacuum stepped, in the period between 800 to 200 BCE, religion.

Those six hundred years brought us Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, monotheism, Greek rationalism, the Buddha, and the famous trio of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle (79-80). I had not known that all of this happened at more or less the same time, and that the countries that produced all of these new ways of thinking were all caught in various crises, but that is how it happened. Each of these schools of thought had commonalities: an unawareness of the unavoidability of suffering, spiritual practice separate from ritual, and a focus on each person's conscience (81). What Armstrong describes as "an ethic of compassion and justice" was a cornerstone, as was individual thought rather than mindless adherence to a leader; questioning everything--including myths-- was prioritized (81). This manifested itself in more critical questioning of myths, though people still held

onto them even as the loss of the everyday sacred, begun in the previous period, continued apace. Armstrong argues that this new awakening meant that while myth "had always demanded action...[during this period] myth would not reveal its full significance, unless it led to the exercise of practical compassion and justice in daily life" (90). Myths are a guide to living and always have been. It is in this period that we can see that this entreat begin to take shape more fully. As Armstrong explains, how fully one bought into these new ideas probably depended at least in part on geography: some leaders, like the Buddha, were tolerant of old myths, while the Israelites flat-out declared them false--hence the development of monotheism and Judaism.

This rejection of mythology would continue in the Western world as the three monotheistic religions--Islam, Christianity, and Judaism--began to take hold. These are the religions, Armstrong argues, that are often ambivalent towards myths--at least those belonging to other peoples--instead positioning themselves as fact or history-based; Eastern religions, by contrast, have tended to coexist more easily with myth (105). In an argument I've never heard made before, Armstrong states that Christ himself was made myth by Saint Paul, whom she quotes as writing "Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now" (107). Jesus had been transformed from man to myth, as easily as putting words to a story and an experience that required them.

That trio of famous Greeks--Plato, Socrates and Aristotle--was obviously tremendously influential in many, many ways. One of the more unexpected is their idea of applying logic to myth. As Western Europeans began to discover this, in 1500 to 2000, their tolerance for myth began to vanish. This was a society founded on logic (119). As logic and science--good things all--began to take primacy over myth, people stopped thinking of, or in terms of, mythology at all. This was, Armstrong says, "problematic" in places; for example, humans had long believed that they were a part of the universe, woven into a larger, meaningful

tapestry, and were suddenly confronted with the idea that "they had only a peripheral place on a undistinguished planet revolving around a minor star" (124). Talk about a rude awakening. Science was taking over, and myth was being left behind. Armstrong suggests that this led to madness like the Witch Craze, in which thousands of people were killed on suspicion of being witches, because "without a powerful mythology to explain people's unconscious fears, they tried to rationalize those fears into 'fact'" (129).

Arguably, this remains true, as people lack a cogent story to capture what lurks where they can't find it. Stories have long existed to put words to that for which we have no words ourselves, to make manifest the things that burrow so deep within us that they are unreachable alone. Armstrong's deeply felt, and persuasive, argument is that we are the poorer for having largely left myth behind. Logic alone is not enough, she claims: "...undiluted logos cannot deal with such deep-rooted, unexorcised fears, desires and neuroses. That is the role of an ethically and spiritually informed mythology" (136). By this, I don't think Armstrong means that we should all believe fully in the same myths, or that we should be praying in schools so that our children learn better, but rather that stories and myths came about in the earliest days of humanity for a reason. And we have gone way, way beyond hunting and gathering, but that reason still holds: to put words to our unconscious, collective and individual, to build compassion and empathy and insight. Myths and stories and novels are all capable of this feat, if we are willing to let them. We can see in Armstrong's work clear evidence of the uses of the first stories: to help explicate and give voice to the fear and mystery inherent in humanity.

As human beings we are hardwired for story. In *The Storytelling Animal*, Gottschall writes that the "human minds yield helplessly to the suction of story" (2012 p. 3). We are powerless beneath it, even as we are being sucked into doing actual work: we are unconsciously filling in the outline drawn by the author, adding images, seeing the words in



our heads even as we drink them in as fast as we can--which is why the best authors, as the saying goes, show rather than tell (5). Gottschall argues that the centrality of story to our lives is vital in part because as we grow we lose the ability to simply play; stories, then, become--as Winnocott alluded to--their own form of play.

Humans have to tell stories, and we have to tell ourselves stories. According to *Animal*, people have an average of two thousand daydreams (average of 14 seconds long) a day. This seems like an astounding number to me, but considering length perhaps it is not. It does serve as an easy illustration of just how deeply ingrained story is for human beings. It starts in childhood, when we really begin to develop the ability to daydream. Play is as natural to children as is breathing, and children do it the world over, in conditions that I cannot imagine; they play in war zones, in concentration camps, in garbage dumps, in ghettos. One of the enduring questions about our durable love of story and play--the two things are, I believe, inseparable--is why on earth humans would evolve to tell stories. It has no obvious evolutionary advantage. But of course it turns out that we don't always evolve along strictly logical lines; evolution can be a fickle mistress. Once, in my sex ed class, I asked a group of high schoolers what makes for a good relationship. Vulnerability, one of the girls said, and one of my most earnest and pragmatic kids titled his head to the side and said "but there's no evolutionary basis for that."

"Oh, Sam!" the others said, and went on to explain to him exactly why being vulnerable can be a good thing. And yet in many ways he is right. From a strictly pragmatic sense, vulnerability--and storytelling--don't necessarily make a lot of sense as adaptations from the hunting-gathering days. But if we look deeper, we can see that perhaps stories are a way to instruct, to delight, or a form of "cognitive play" and all of those things are advantageous (27). This theory, Gottschal adds, could certainly be wrong. Stories might just be for nothing: maybe it's a happy accident, a side effect of a process that we still know little

about. But we do know--from Armstrong and from others--that humans, by design or by glitch, need stories on a deep, fundamental level, like oxygen. How we can use those stories that we so desperately need is the focus of this thesis.

### **The Plots We Use**

In his book *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker posits that we as a species use the same templates over and over again and that these templates are as fundamentally important to us as are our most base impulses. The first of these is the monster, which often has some human characteristics but can never be fully human, and which is always and above all egocentric; the focus of this story is the defeat of the monster. (p. 32, 33). These stories invariably include an exciting escape from a near-certain death, giving credence to Armstrong's earlier-discussed theory that myths and stories are really, fundamentally, about the human need to reckon with that final reality. Monsters can and do take many forms and appear in many guises across many genres: we can see them easily in science fiction, detective stories, thrillers and mysteries--but also in everyday stories of people battling themselves. Many monsters, especially historically, are more black and white, with no redemptive value, but our culture is currently having an antihero moment, with television and to some extent books reveling in the pleasure of rooting for complex heroes or even outright villains. Among the bestselling books of last summer was *Gone Girl*, narrated in part by a sociopathic, lying, scheming woman. *Breaking Bad* is one of the most critically acclaimed television series in recent memory and its protagonist is a chemistry teacher turned ruthless meth dealer--following in the footsteps of a mobster on *The Sopranos*. Monster stories are sometimes a way to explore wish fulfillment, as often seen in war stories, and sometimes a way to kill off in fiction that which cannot be battled so effectively in real life. Sometimes, though, we use monster stories to find the cruelty within ourselves and to face it, to see our own monsters made real and to then defeat them. These

stories, Booker claims, tend to follow the same trajectory, often with a pattern of constriction and then relaxation--a pattern that repeats in most of the other kinds of plots (49).

Rags to riches is a plot familiar to anyone who has lived in America: it is, in many ways, the plot that embodies the American dream. In its most literal iteration, of course, a character--often a child when the plot begins, as Booker points out, since this is the story in which we are most likely to encounter a child (54)-- begins life poor and miserable and grows up to become rich and happy, usually through hard work and/or luck. Generally the hero is plucky and humble enough to be considered by the reader worthy of these great riches: Booker uses the example of poor Cinderella, so abused by her stepsisters and stepmother and so consistently good and kind--instead of behaving as I suspect most people would under those circumstances--and thus becoming, in the eyes of the audience, deserving of the love of the prince (55). Rags to riches unfolds in predictable stages as well: from humble beginnings to initial success to crisis to an ordeal to the ending triumph (66). We can see too that rags to riches may sometimes be used by the more creative among us for less literal riches, as a framework for looking at the ways in which people alter their own fates.

The quest plot is among the most famous and well-known. It is the quest plot that I think we often go to when we contemplate the great stories, the great epics. A hero of some kind must go on a journey fraught with danger, across perilous lands, often fighting temptations--sometimes of a sexual nature--usually with quirky helpers, very often to achieve some sort of world-saving goal, and must triumph in a death-defying final battle (p. 75-82). Very often the quest includes fighting a monster, and perhaps elements of rags to riches as well, but the point, as they say, is the journey itself. Quest books are wildly popular for young adults but have a long storied history in myth as well--the *Odyssey* being the most famous example. As with other types of plots, quests can be used metaphor.

The fourth plot, voyage and return, is also a journey but is quite different, as Booker points out, from a quest: it is not goal orientated but rather a character or group leaves their familiar environment, travels to a strange land, becomes threatened there, and returns home (p. 87). Booker posits that these stories are about a character's need to be changed, that "by definition, he has begun the story in a state of limited awareness...which plunged him into a realm of existence he had never...imagined...as a result he had...moved from ignorance to knowledge (101). In this case even more than the quest plot is the journey that is important, but unlike in the quest--where the battles, the challenges, matter--in this case it is the experience of a new world vastly different from their everyday reality.

The first four of Booker's plots are fairly straightforward. The next two are comedy and tragedy. Obviously, attempting a paragraph summation of either of these plot types in this thesis would be foolish at best. Briefly, in the former, Booker suggests that comedy always contains an insulated world rife with growing confusion, the realization of new information, changing perceptions and people coming together--all, one presumes, for comedic effect (150). Tragedy, meanwhile, consists of a pattern that involves a nightmare stage and a destruction stage, and there are--obviously--and huge number of different kinds of tragic stories. These two--comedy and tragedy--are by definition nebulous, as is the final of the seven plots, rebirth. These stories are bigger and broader and I would argue that any of the first four stories--overcoming the monster, rags to riches, quest, and voyage and return--will fit into one of the final three.

Booker's thesis is that these are the stories that we tell. That's it. That "whenever any of us tries to create a story in our own imagination, we will find that there are basic figures and situations around which it takes shape" (215). As he says, at their most basic level all stories are about facing something dark and then returning somewhere safe (216). You can see this in the stories we tell to children: Max goes to where the wild things are and returns home to

find supper still hot, Alexander has a horrible no good very bad day but his mother reminds him that some days are like that even in Australia; Madeline is rushed to the hospital with a burst appendix but then is returned to her Miss Clavel, and on and on. I suspect that is the basic human awareness of there being hard fights ahead, as well as that ultimate and unwinnable fight at the very end, coupled with our desperate need to be loved and cared for, to have somewhere safe to return to.

As Booker discusses, these plots add complexity to that most basic kind of story (217). They allow us to fight enemies within, and then work together as a cultural whole with the same archetypes.

### **Personal Myths**

In his book *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, Dan MacAdams argues that just as Booker and Armstrong posit stories are part of what makes us fundamentally human. However, he goes a step further in his detailed explanation of how personal myths come to be.

MacAdams divides his examination into life stages and how each stage is correlated with a certain kind of mythmaking. For me, his most revelatory argument comes early on: that

in their first relationships of love and trust, infants develop unconscious attitudes about hope and despair. Babies learn the first unconscious lessons about how the world works and how human beings can be expected to behave. An infant's relationship with mother and father is likely to influence the long-term development of a myth's narrative tone. Every personal myth has a pervasive narrative tone, ranging from hopeless pessimism to boundless optimism.....we have been "collecting material" for the story since Day One, even though we don't remember Day One. The years of infancy and childhood provide us with some of the most important

raw material for our identities. The first two years of life leave us with an unconscious legacy that especially affects the narrative tone of our story. It is a legacy about hope and trust and about how the world works and how stories are supposed to turn out. (p. 35, 40).

We have long known that infants who are securely attached to a parent do much, much better over the long term, and that negating the effects of insecure attachment is hugely difficult and sometimes impossible. However, MacAdams brings a completely new perspective onto the importance of very early childhood experiences and attachments. It isn't just that babies are becoming attached in ways that will have tremendous import for their future happiness. It is also that they are setting the stage for the story they will tell themselves for the rest of their lives. So what happens in infancy stays with us in all sorts of completely unconscious ways; it shadows us, for good or for ill, in every story that we use to explain our histories.

MacAdams argues that we begin to understand the concept of the self that this story will be about early on as we start to understand that "the 'me' exists in space and time as a causal, continuous and independent agent" (44). We come to this understanding through the process of mirroring, when caregivers are attuned to our emotional state, celebrate us, and reflect our feelings back to us so that we learn what it is to experience the full range of human emotion. Depending on the character of these interactions and the strengths of these attachments, our first few years of life leave us, argues MacAdams, with "a set of unconscious and nonverbal 'attitudes' about self, other, and the world, and about how the three relate to each other" (47). Some--hopefully most--children leave this period of infancy and toddlerhood with a sense of hope, a feeling that what they want is possible, that the world is safe and secure (47). The less lucky of us leave this period with a completely

unconscious tone for our personal myths, a sense that the world is forever unpredictable and unsafe. This is, as MacAdams points out, a pervasive tone that is hard to change: part of the work of therapy, he argues, is to shift the myth.

This early period is also when we begin to collect images for our myths. As MacAdams explains it, preschoolers "appropriate images from their culture to suit their immediate personal wishes and desires" (55). As we saw with Booker and with Armstrong, all cultures tend to have many of the same kind of myths and stories, merely taking different forms; it would make sense, then, that personal myths take advantage of this rich tapestry. Americans mostly have access to a variety of fairy-tale style archetypes, evil queens and good princes, and these are incorporated into everyday play and then, later, into our stories and our self-myths. This is how we begin to make meaning, in this collection of archetypes. Later, these collective cultural images become what MacAdams calls "imago[es]... a personified and idealized concept of the self" (122). These imagoes are basically the grown-up versions of our childhood archetypes and these collective characters. MacAdams describes a taxonomy of imagoes, including the healer, teacher, counselor, warrior, traveler, lover, caregiver, friend, escapist, and survivor. These are, essentially, the main characters in our life stories.

They may help us to understand what MacAdams quotes psychologist Hazel Markus as calling our "possible selves;" the people we could be, the people we are afraid we could be, the people we want to be (128). This brings us back nicely to MacAdams' earlier point that children understand reality as concrete, as absolute, and that as they get older reality and enter Piaget's formal operations stage "reality is understood as a *subset* of what might be" (77, emphasis original). Part of what makes our personal myths so vital is that they help us to understand not only our actual, concrete reality but also our possible realities. Developmentally, these myths help us to form an ideology in our adolescence.

MacAdams uses his book to explore the many ways in which, he says, "creat[ing] a

personal myth is to fashion a history of the self” (102). As infants, we begin our unconscious writing of our myths, collecting images and especially building towards the tone that we will carry forward. Myths have varying import over the lifespan, but all along the way, they remain a vital force, one that compels us forward.

MacAdams’ book and research perfectly capture my goal in creating and working on this research. I want to help my participants to understand their own personal myths and to see how the telling of those myths may build authenticity in their voices. I hope to also draw some conclusions that may be applicable to other students. I have a more selfish reason, too. In a chapter on exploring one’s own myth, MacAdams talks about changing your personal myth in varying ways. One of those changes is what he calls personological. MacAdams writes that not all of us have coherent myths. “The problem,” he says, “is not that your myth is stagnant. The problem is that your myth is no good. It doesn’t work...or perhaps it doesn’t exist...there is no sense of self” (274). For me, this is true. There is no good coherent myth, and part of my desire to embark on this process has been to understand how myths work for other people and to work on my own.

#### **Chapter Four: Lou and the Scary, Scary Elevator**

This chapter examines how one particular child uses stories to scaffold her identity formation as well as how children’s literature can help others do the same.

The ways that children use stories to explain their worlds can be especially telling, as I think they do so in the same ways that adults do—they are just more up front about it. Let’s use Lou as an example. A bright, hyper verbal child who turned three in May 2014, Lou has an incessant need to narrate her world. Her shorthand for this kind of storytelling—the kind that reminds her of what the world is like and how she functions in it—is the oft-used phrase “talk about it.” This is her way of reminding the adults in her life that her story



matters, and because she is a small child, she requires endless repetition. But Lou also uses stories to help her overcome fears. Months ago I took her to a museum with a glass elevator. As Lou loves elevators, I assumed she would find a glass one even more fascinating, but she most assuredly did not: she requested, strongly, to ride the “regular elevator” instead. Over the course of the next six or so weeks, Lou constantly asked me to “talk about the scary elevator.” Over and over again I contextualized her fears for her, reminded her of how she had felt: “you did not want to go on the glass elevator because you thought it was scary. We went on the regular elevator instead.” Eventually, I started adding a coda: “maybe next time we go to the museum, you will want to ride the glass elevator.”

Sure enough, we returned to the museum after about a month and a half. Lou, who had spent much of that time endlessly discussing her fear of the elevator and pretending the bathroom was the glass elevator, strode easily into the previously scary, now nearly mythical elevator. She pushed the button. We rode it up and down over and over again. Talking about it—creating a narrative in which I, someone she loved and trusted, had validated her fears and *made the story include overcoming them*—had allowed her to move past the idea of the glass elevator as scary. The first thing she will say after something frightening happens—a fall from a tricycle that stuns her, accidentally shutting herself in a closet, even the sound of another child wailing—is “talk about it?” If the adult fails to do so adequately, she will add her own details: “you forgot...” And if, god forbid, the adult fails to contextualize the story properly, she will scold “start from the beginning!” The constant telling and re-telling of every incident that she has found scary allows her to master her fears. It seems as if it allows for faster recovery, as well: Lou tends not to panic when she falls, apparently reassured that she will be able to talk it through. And books have helped me to give her the tools that she needs to regulate her own feelings: we will talk, for example, about a character being frustrated in a book, and Lou has learned to say “I’m so frustrated!” when she can’t figure

something out, instead of, say, throwing a shoe.

Storytelling is how Lou recaptures experiences; she is unconsciously using stories to scaffold her own memory. It is the beginning of the crafting of her own self-narrative. She has intuited that the best way for her to understand her world is to make it into a narrative, and to play with those narratives, to make them consistently relatable and an integral part of her self. Stories make what might otherwise be a scattered or fragmented memory into something concrete, something that she can hang on to. The story of her sister's birth—what could have been a frightening experience, since her parents were simply not there one morning and stayed gone for a couple days only to return with an infant-- is given a soothing narrative when I tell her (again) of our purchase of a duck balloon, the funny way the woman blew it up, how we tied it to her stuffed monkey, how we saw her parents and met her sister and then took the duck balloon home from the hospital with us. The story she has chosen to tell and re-tell is not one in which she is afraid upon waking to find her parents gone or even one in which she missed her parents: instead, it is an exciting story about going to the hospital, getting a balloon, riding an elevator, and meeting a baby. Similarly, when we do talk about things that were scary, a fall for example, the way that Lou has chosen to interpret the world means that I can always make it clear that everything was okay in the end: “you fell,” I might explain, “and you cried and cried, and then you got a band-aid and a snuggle, and then you were all better.” She will nod, reassured that things have, once again, righted themselves.

Every experience is a story for Lou, and being so young means that the boundaries between fantasy and reality remain permeable—so in her world, what happens in one storybook can easily happen in another, and in her own life. One morning, she sat cross-legged on the floor of the library leafing through a copy of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, a book she also has at home. She “read” parts of the book, from memory, with varying

accuracy, and then froze, her voice rising in excitement. “It’s the coconut tree!” she exclaimed, pointing to a picture of a tree in Eric Carle’s classic text. She meant the coconut tree the letters climb and fall from in *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, a totally unrelated book with completely different visual and prose styles. But for her, it’s all of a piece. Each book bleeds into each new book. After reading multiple “first experience” books about a mouse named Maisy who apparently has no parents—*Maisy Goes to the Library*, *Maisy Goes to the City*—she created her own version, changing the words in one of her books: *Maisy Blows Her Nose*, Lou announced. In the jumble of being a young child who reads and plays and tells a lot of stories there is room for much movement. Between her sister’s birth and the enthralling tale of *Maisy Goes to the Hospital*, for example, much of Lou’s world has lately revolved around that institution: “I have a rash on my leg,” she will explain from the backseat, “and I need to go the real hospital to get some cream and some shots so I will be all better.” I suggest the pretend hospital, and she takes umbrage: “NO, Vanessa. I need the real hospital.”

Again, this confusion of fantasy and reality—developmentally completely typical—means that the characters in all of Lou’s stories, the ones in her head and the ones told to her and the ones in her books, are all equally real. She knows the difference, more or less, between “real” and “pretend;” she certainly knows that her bathroom is a pretend elevator, that her toy food, as much as she enjoys feeding it to people, provides no actual nourishment, that when her stuffed monkey goes to swimming class on a blue blanket it is not a real pool. But Maisy, she is certain, went to a real hospital, not a pretend one, just like her baby sister.

Before the birth of her younger sister when she turned 2.5, Lou read a book about being a big sister over and over. The book, narrated by a new big sister, explains that babies cry to tell us something and that babies are too young to eat “pizza, apples, and ice cream.” Months after the baby’s birth, Lou hears a cry and looks up to say “babies cry to tell us

something!” She is very clear, too, that her sister cannot eat “pizza, apples and ice cream.” She had internalized her picture book in a way that was of direct and important use to her: it gave her the appropriate language for her feelings about her sister as well as helping her to explain some of the concrete changes in her life. Books like the one about being a big sister can sometimes seem boring and reductive to adults—myself very much included—and for a good reason: they are, too often, poorly written and badly imagined. But young children tend to appreciate and seek out these prescriptive texts. Although I generally refuse to let her take them home because no one in her life wants to read them over and over, Lou often seeks out a series of utterly transparent books at the library: *Tails Are Not For Pulling*, *Pacifiers Are Not Forever*, *Hands Are Not For Hitting*, and so on. Utterly boring from an adult perspective, since we are already, mostly, aware that tail-pulling and hitting are off the table and pacifiers are generally not our preferred accessory, but compelling to a preschooler who may know these things on one level but still seeks the concrete rules and the prescribed alternatives.

Haven explains that infants think in “story terms” (2007). Our brains produce a unimaginable number of neurons before we are born; after birth, only a fraction survive. That fraction includes the neurons best suited for making sense of the world, and we now know that infants make sense of the world through stories. So our brains are literally wired to love stories. We can see this in Lou and her profound love for any narrative, in the way that she is, by requesting certain stories about her life be told to her over and over again, beginning to build her own self-narrative. These are not the stories that will define her life forever, but they are the stories that define her world right now. If we accept that identity is at least as much constructed as discovered, that finding and creating yourself are part and parcel of the experience of identity formation, we can see in Lou that both processes are engaged. She is, certainly, constantly finding things out about herself: she loves water, slides, cheese, swings, “the Sesame Street friends,” trains, milkshakes, elevators, museums, and a

variety of people: she does not like fritatta, the Santa Clause she met at church, the snippet of *The Hobbit* she saw, red peppers, when the sink sprays water, or riding toys without pedals. She is also *constructing* herself: her repeated entreaty to “talk about it” is no less than her way of building her own understanding of what has happened to her, and thus, who she is because of that.

Perhaps the most comprehensive example of Lou’s storytelling came one afternoon as she sat thumbing through an anthology of stories about Clifford the big red dog. At yoga class once, she had heard a story about feelings, where each page featured a different example: “sometimes I feel scared...sometimes I feel like kissing a sea lion” (Parr 2005, p. 2, 21). Now, with her Clifford book, Lou used to structure of the Parr book she’d heard to essentially create her own identity, all in one story:

Sometimes I feel happy. Sometimes I feel mad. Sometimes I feel frustrated. Sometimes I feel like hurting my leg. Sometimes I feel like knocking over a table. Sometimes I feel like reading and playing after that. Sometimes I feel going home. Sometimes I feel like put[ting] my feet on the wall.... sometimes I feel like lying down and trying to go to sleep. Sometimes I feel like getting out of bed when I’m asleep. Sometimes I feel like staying in bed and go[ing] to sleep. Sometimes I stay in bed to get to sleep. Sometimes nothing happens and sometimes tomorrow beeps and sometimes the refrigerator beeps too. Sometimes I beep and beep and beep. They beep a lot of times....sometimes they beep just right. Sometimes they beep a lot. Sometimes somebody makes it go away....sometimes the smoke detector beeps too...I love dessert (holds up book) you see? Sometimes I like playing with my friends. Sometimes I feel like going to the hospital to get a cast and getting a hug. Sometimes I feel like putting the chair and the table back up.... Sometimes I am frustrated with the table. Sometimes I be careful. Sometimes I cut my finger. Sometimes I get a bandaid!

Lou's story is a perfect example of her ability to use narrative to explore her world. She is creating a story for herself that explores recent frightening experiences (the smoke detector went off a few days before she came up with this), her favorite pretend-play activity (it's all about the hospitals) the feelings she knows the names of, and ways that she fantasizes about expressing anger and exploring her power (knocking over a table—something she has never done in real life). She was able to use a book that she'd already heard to scaffold her own storytelling so that she could create a narrative that explored many facets of her life and personality.

Stories for young children are useful, often, as a way to give them access to the feelings and words that they either simply don't know yet or that we don't readily allow them to have. Because of the way society constructs the child, as an imprint onto which we project all of our beliefs about naivete and innocence, children are not often considered old enough or mature enough to feel as though [things in] their lives are hard...Instead, [some] children must rely on picture books to express the emotions they don't yet have words for. A quick scan of the library shelves will show a variety of books designed to help children understand bad days and hard feelings...perhaps the most influential of these "bad day" books is *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, in which poor Alexander has a rough day. He feels misunderstood by his mother, who scolds him for fighting with his brothers even though they started it, and his father, who is angry that he spilled ink, even though he didn't mean to. His teacher says he forgot 16 in counting time and finds his picture of an invisible castle not quite up to par. His mother forgot to put dessert in his lunch box. His best friend says that Alexander is now only his third best friend. His brothers tease him, there's kissing on TV and lima beans for dinner, e has to wear his railroad train pajamas—all things he hates. Throughout the book, which is narrated by Alexander, he says "it was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" (Viorst 1972). He'd really like to move to

Australia—such a far away place. Surely things are less unjust there.

Alexander provides a wonderful, clear example to children that their concerns, their grievances, are valid. Since it is a children's book, it ends on a note of hope: "My mom says some days are like that. Even in Australia" (Viorst 1972). The genius of this last line is that it gives us so much information: Alexander's mother is not a monster, she noticed that it was a bad day, she made it explicit that, well, some days are just like that—no matter where you go. Similarly, Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* is so angry at his mother, and she at him, that after his mischief-making ("the night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another") he is sent to bed without supper (Sendak, 1963). In Max's anger and disequilibrium, he imagines his bedroom overcome by a forest—you can watch the white space in the page vanish as fantasy takes hold—and he travels to a kingdom where he has dominion over the frightening titular wild things just by "...staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once..." (Sendak, 1963). He has the power now: he can send them to their bed without supper, he can tell them off, but none of that power will fix his fundamental loneliness: Max, like all of us, wants despite his anger and his fear to be back "where someone loved him best of all" (Sendak, 1963). When he does return home, he, like Alexander, finds that his mother has forgiven him: she has left him a hot supper, after all.

Both of these books validate the extremely understandable and common fears that young children have about their parents and their feelings. Both offer reassurance that parents do not remain angry forever, that children can experience genuine anger at their parents and vice versa and it will not be permanent, that bad feelings end. Other stories for young children are written with different but equally explicit and important messages: in, for example, *The Paper Bag Princess*, Elizabeth and her betrothed, Ronald, are both described as looking just like royalty: they have the clothes and, it seems, the attitude. When Ronald is abducted by a dragon, Elizabeth must tramp through a forest, following a trail of horse's

bones, and outsmart the dragon to rescue her would-be husband—who greets her by explaining that she no longer looks like a princess. “Ronald,” Elizabeth says in one of the great zingers of children’s literature, “your clothes are really pretty and your hair is all neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum” (Munch, 1980). The wedding, obviously, is off. It’s hard to read this as anything other than a way to show girls that not only are they capable of rescuing the boys but that, once having done so, they may decide on a different life trajectory—that there are more important things, perhaps, than pretty clothes and neat hair.

Picture books exist in part to make money, and obviously to entertain, but just as importantly to help children gain an understanding of how the world works and where the possibilities lie. There’s a reason children who are read to frequently do better in school, and I don’t think it’s just the vocabulary (or the related socioeconomic status). I think it is also the sense of possibility that picture books open up in young children, the sense that Lou has that the world is populated by interesting things and people and that even when something scary or sad happens there is help. No book or library collection is enough to overcome obstacles suffered by children facing either poverty or negligent/abusive parents—or both—and I certainly do not mean to suggest that literature is a panacea. A million readings of *Alexander* aren’t going to convince a child who goes to bed hungry every night that there’s any use in believing tomorrow might be different. However, I do believe that the ability of good picture books to give children the language to describe and to validate their feelings is vital, and matters for all children. Books give children words for things they cannot yet explain, and have been used successfully in a variety of educational settings—perhaps most famously with teacher and writer Vivian Paley.

Paley’s classroom is predicated on the idea that children learn about their existence and the parameters of their world, in and through story. In her classroom, children are given the chance to tell stories in a collaborative way; rather than dictate stories alone in the



hallway, children are consistently encouraged to have the teacher transcribe their stories and other children have the chance to contribute as well. This collaboration means that storytelling becomes a live presence in the classroom. The children have the chance to make their ideas come alive, and they can use play and story to work out their own beliefs. As the work of others discussed in this literature review as also shown, play and story are fundamentally intertwined in childhood, and Paley's research and experience echoes this. Children's play tends to take narrative form, and children can use their own story creation and play to work out their feelings about complex situations. For example, war and weapon play can help children explore issues of death and rebirth--and as Armstrong argues, all myths are really, in the end, a reaction to the fact that we all have to die. Children don't really understand death, but war and weapon play, despite being frightening for adults to witness at times, provide a valuable context for children to explore their fantasies and ideas about death. They can pretend to shoot and kill other children, thus delving into their ideas about culpability. They are aware that they are not actually doing real harm, but by pretending to hurt each other, children can practice feeling the emotions that go along with hurting and being hurt in a contained and safe space. Thus, through narrative play, children practice the empathy that many story scholars say is a hallmark of why we are a story-loving species.

Children's play tends to be full of conflict: violence, sobbing, parents leaving, bullies and growling animals, but adult stories are just as troubled. Gottschall argues that all stories, certainly all popular and timeless stories, have one thing at their root: trouble. They are about conflict in some arena or another. There are, Gottschall adds, some exceptions, but no one wants to read them (55) (this makes me feel better. On the whole, I despise the modernists: I don't care how showy and gorgeous and out of the box your writing is if there isn't any story there, though a crackling good story is also insufficient if marred by horrendous Danielle Steele style writing). Stories tend to be about just a few things, at their core. We tell

ourselves the same stories over and over, in different formats and through different lenses, so that we may find comfort on the journey, or a resolution that may be applicable in the real world.

Just as Lou uses her stories to scaffold her own memory and to help her create her own identity, so to do adolescents and adults. We tell ourselves stories about their lives, whether consciously or not. Stories infiltrate our lives constantly. Dreams are the unconscious, reckoning. Gottschal connects conspiracy theorists--which can have dangerous implications for public policy--to our need for stories (111). We read, or, increasingly, watch, countless stories over a lifetime. And we tell ourselves all kinds of stories. The ones that we craft about our own histories, though, are not objectively true: as Gottschal puts it, "a life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings" (161). Our memories are notoriously unreliable. Anyone who has seen one of the roughly six thousand courtroom dramas in existence can tell you that eyewitness testimony is often contradictory, with one witness swearing it was a tall white male in a blue jacket and the other promising it was a short black woman in a red dress. Therapists have been known to implant false memories in their patients. We don't always remember even mundane details with anything approaching accuracy, and our memories are often fragmented. We can have strong sensory memories, but "sight, sound, taste and smell are stored in different locations" so it's not as though we can dial up all the senses related to a specific day (169). We all want to be the heroes of our own stories, and we are: what we often forgot is that so is everyone else.

### **Chapter Five: What's Your Story?**

The complete prompts and responses from my participants may be found in appendix one; my responses are in appendix two. In this chapter, I look at the writing my participants created, the patterns, and the conclusions we drew.

. I was especially impressed with Amelia’s work, which doesn’t surprise me—she is very talented and has spent a lot of time writing slam poetry. She wrote:

“Before I was born, I knew the heat of stage lights on my face....

I’m from five houses: a carpet that looked like sand for my Barbies, a basement we turned into a haunted house in October, a window that made us feel like we were in a treehouse, a trampoline in the backyard, a couch more perfect for sleeping than any bed.

I’m from a frozen vial of genetic material and a one-in-a-trillion chance....

I’m from a church with an arts and crafts closet that smells like childhood and fruit hanging from a trellis. I’m from a church with the worst fucking sound system and bright blue choir robes and people who mold you like the play-doh that tastes like salt under your nails....

I’m from a grandmother who can paint and a grandfather who would go to the bank to exchange his money for two-dollar bills before we came up to visit.

I’m from the envelope full of two-dollar bills in my secret desk drawer.

And before I was born I knew the heat of stage lights on my face.”

I was also proud of Terence who is a smart, sensitive kid with a self-deprecating sense of humor, and I suspect, some experience with depression; I think he’s probably always felt like an outsider. He writes about suburbia, going for walks early in the morning, how “this town always looks better without people...calculated, designed, all blemishes intentional.” This especially cutting—well observed and accurate.

I could recognize much of Adeline’s history—her deaf sister, the fact that her family is a little lower on the income scale than many of her peers—in her writing, and, too, the near-pride that she takes in that. I was curious to see that Paige and John both went for prose rather than following the “Where I’m From” poem example (I made it very clear that they could, so it wasn’t a problem—just curious). Both of them went for much more literal interpretations, too, and I wonder if that is a result of using prose rather than poetry. I think this is probably why I chose prose as well—it was self-protective. Much less risk of giving something away inadvertently. Also, Paige and John are less comfortable with writing

generally; Paige in particular, though very smart, I don't think considers herself particularly creative. However, her final point—about not knowing where you are from until you realize where you are not from—is quite insightful.

Since one of the main goals of this project is to measure and grow authenticity, I was pleased that we seem to off to a good start: the participants uniformly felt that they sounded more honest in their writing here than they would for school.

My second prompt asked the participants to discuss siblings. Again, Terence showcased his wry humor, saying of his younger sister:

“...So today, as she rose from her crowd of idle- minded teenage bodies,  
I broke away from my insignificant conversation and broke into a sufficiently swift sprint,  
Greeting her with open arms,  
And leaping into a well- deserved, vengeful embrace.  
She never knew what hit her.”

I love that Terence thinks of hugging his sister in school as big operatic revenge for the fact that she accuses him of not being affectionate enough.

Amelia, on the other hand, offered three vignettes: one in which she convinced her younger sister of something, one in which their differences come to light on a dog-walk, and one in which, curled into each other in bed, they watch a television show. That back-and-forth—the intense anger at one's spoiled, shallow younger sister, and the intense love for the sister who will curl up and watch stupid television with you—is such an integral part of the sibling relationship.

Adeline wrote a long poem that made me glad that I already knew the backstory. She is unusual in my participants in having more than one sibling and in having a sibling with complicated health issues—Kalie is deaf and had a cochlear implant that I believe somehow backfired and ended up really harming her, it was a model that was later recalled, and she has

been in and out of the hospital. As Adeline puts it: “sick from the start you never had a chance.” It was fascinating to see, in Adeline’s piece, all of the complexity of that, the worry and the pride in a relationship with a sick sibling. Too, it was interesting to see reflected her relationship with her older sister, and the ways in which Adeline clearly feels that she has had to act as if she is the elder sibling in that dyad:

“I remember when we were younger, and you got a barbie jeep for your birthday. Even though you were three years older than I, you refused to use it unless I drove.

And the time when you were planning a birthday party, but couldn't force your self to make the reservations at the restaurant, so i made the call.

Instead of growing tired after the twentieth time i circled the yard, or the seventh number i pressed to make the call

I grew stronger because you needed me to be.”

Paige’s piece captures that tension and worry, the anger as well as the childhood pranks:

“I went to her door and wrote ‘I hate Abby’ on it in black marker. Abby was her best friend at the time, so I thought this would be a clever way for her to suffer; when Abby came over she would see the note and think Abby wrote it, and then never want to be friends with her again. Genius, right? I don’t even remember how the fight ended.”

The third prompt was about friendship, and the responses were wide-ranging.

Terence’s sad-edged poem reads in part:

“...We would pick up sticks,

And fight our parents’ wars for them.

Sometimes, in the summer, we would lie on our backs

On neighboring grass (our yard didn’t have any).

We would shoot the stars out of the sky,

Foolishly unaware

That the stars had died long ago....”

Amelia captured the alchemy of adolescent friendship in part of her piece:

“In eleventh grade we watched hours of TV, ate disgusting amounts of junk food, and cried together. In eleventh grade, we had hook-ups and break-ups and rode the bus together. In eleventh grade, we stopped being friends because we had to be and started being friends because we wanted to be.”

Both Adeline and Paige wrote about specific friends, Adeline in poetry and Paige in prose, and how much those friends mean to them. John wrote a simple piece briefly exploring his childhood friendships.

It was in assignment four, when I asked about hospitals and doctors, that I really noticed a shift in some of my participants. Adeline was particularly impressive.. She took her sister’s story, which is devastatingly sad, and turned into an exploration of how her own childhood and adolescence has been and is being shaped by trips to the hospital, by wandering around that contained universe:

“...They remind me of how strange it is that my father and I have rituals for going to the hospital.

But also reminds me that because of those trips, I have a lot of great memories with him. How it was a race to see how far across the hospital we could get, before we had to turn back to get to my sister in time.

The freedom I had to roam. Johns Hopkins is a big place.

It reminds me that waiting rooms have empty play sections to give off the illusion children play there

As I got older, and more aware, that how I started to see it.

An illusion

Of happiness.

Of Normality.

As if they have nine year olds on the kidney failure floor all the time.

Then again, they probably do.

It reminds me how one place can bring both unfathomable sadness and ecstatic joy.

Doctors remind me that I still have a lot more visits to the hospital in my life time.

They also remind me that for every visit I go to, my sister will go to three more.

That every time I go to the hospital, it is an option

I can leave the room and go exploring for two hours

and she has to be there....”

Her writing is vivid, and I can picture her roaming around Johns Hopkins--which is a huge campus full of unimaginable and everyday suffering—while her sister is poked and prodded

and her father worries over both girls. Her acknowledgement, that kids with kidney failure are seen everyday even as it is something that is unique and terrifying in her family, is especially poignant. She ended her poem mid-sentence to replicate death, which felt very adolescent and no less touching for it.

Amelia and Terence, often the strongest writers, both tried to capture feelings: extreme nausea for the former (My stomach rotting away/Tendrils of pain stretching from my temples to my knees...) and of going to the dentist. As is typical of both their writing and their personalities, Amelia's is much more visceral, while Terence's shines with a wry, ironic humor, in part perhaps to shield to himself:

"...The man's smile becomes the bell curve.

I stand up.

You could've sworn I needed knee work as well

The way my legs stiffened...."

In assignment five, I asked my participants about school. There were some real stand-out lines in these pieces. From Terence: "To grow old watching the hands glide across the blankness of my days." From Amelia, "i find my ladies-in-waiting, knights in lace dresses/daggers still drawn, never really sheathed./we look for a place to breathe/or maybe just a place we won't be noticed." Taken together these capture beautifully the ennui of school, interwoven with moments of mean-girl spite. All of their pieces reminded me of how *exhausting* school can be, to keep up that front for so many hours. Paige's point about having to be smart but not too smart also hits home. I was curious that she feels that teachers don't expect enough. Adeline branched out into fiction, though I sort of wished that she hadn't at the same time—it made it harder to find her voice in there. Finally, John really summed it up when he said "I've written so many descriptive paragraphs about things I don't care about in school, that honestly it's hard to write one about school." While it is certainly true that kids need to practice all kinds of writing and practice is vital to becoming a skillful writer—perhaps we aren't teaching writing the right way, if it is so boring.

Assignment six asked the participants to reflect on relationships. Terence's piece was really striking this week. Listen to the last three lines:

“Will I one day simply cease to walk through the front door into my deepest emotions?  
Will I be introduced to the headlights of a black SUV, 20 over the limit, that I could have sworn wasn't there a second ago?  
Or will someone join me?”

The way I read this piece, Terence is talking about wandering around, basking in his own loneliness, and his wish to be joined by someone. As well, the reference to the SUV tells me that he is aware of the consequences of being alone, of being lonely, for his entire life. I've known Terence for a long time, at least four years. He is a smart, witty kid, but he isn't classically or traditionally “cool” and he has suffered from depression. It is striking, and heartbreaking, to hear him identify the long-term effects of his continued isolation.

I really loved Adeline's note that while single “It was as if my very presence had blinkers as I walked around pointing to my empty hand, the blank space in front of my lips, where another pair should be.” This underlines the pressure on adolescents to be in relationship at all times, to make sure that they are never ever alone—even though the work of adolescence is really to learn to be alone with yourself. How reassuring it is to see that Adeline has found the strength to follow the dreams she had before someone told her she wasn't enough on her own.

Amelia showed us a glimpse of herself and her boyfriend in a garden. I loved how reflective Amelia let herself be even in just showing us that tiny snippet of herself and the boy: she explored how she liked him and liked kissing and confused the two, and how worried she is that she will never find the kind of epic romance we all dream of it because she doesn't want to settle for something:



“...And it was sweet and good and I appreciated it but it wasn’t enough. And now I’m afraid: afraid of the geeky kid who calls me ‘darling’ and listens to my political rants and holds my hand during Disney movies. They’re similar in so many ways, and I feel similar towards them in so many ways, and I’m afraid I’m going to imagine the fireworks and try to be content with ‘happy’ and ‘compatible’ and force myself to forget the rest. And I’m afraid the ‘rest’ is just a fairytale and this is all there is and I’m going to miss out on it if I keep looking for more.”

I think this question of settling and what constitutes it is a fundamental one for so many women and girls.

It was Paige that I was most impressed with this week. Thus far, Paige had written very concretely, very literally, about every topic I have given. But this time she wrote a short poem:

“I’ll dream a dream that was meant for me and you.  
I desire for you to always take time to remember  
there was countless things left for us to do.  
Reality broke our wheels as we came unhindered  
it will remain a thousand years innocent and true  
even as our love crumbled and splintered.  
Our hearts are entwined, even as we start anew  
the dreams were summers and frost-bitten winters.  
It’s gone now, but sometimes out of the blue  
I remember the heat, the cold, the kisses and blisters.  
Our story will forever remain, bring us close together.”

It isn’t technically fantastic, but it shows flashes of the devastation she felt at the ending of a long relationship—and more than anything, I am so proud of her for being brave enough to branch out and make herself more vulnerable. John remained in his concrete state, talking about never having had a relationship.

John branched out, though, in assignment seven, bodies. He wrote a poem:

*Long and Lean*

Long and lean  
Since the baby fat disappeared, that’s what I’ve been  
Long and lean  
Not overweight or fat, but not muscle bound like an Adonis. Just  
Long and lean  
Taller than average, but not insanelly tall  
Long and lean  
A bit un-coordinated, but not bad at sports either

Long and lean  
 A skinny white boy from the suburbs  
 Cowlicked from birth, and sunburned for part of the year  
 But I can only remember my body ever being  
 Long and lean

Paige, too, wrote another poem, and this is my favorite of her pieces:

seconds  
 minutes  
 hours  
 wasted  
 staring at a piece of glass  
 hanging on the wall

pulling  
 pinching  
 prodding  
 poking  
 the extra skin  
 that doesn't belong

thinking  
 hoping  
 wishing  
 believing  
 that tugging harder  
 will make it all melt off

The difference between these pieces is so striking. All three girls, plus Terence, show clear difficulties with their bodies. The first two lines of Terence's piece are especially striking: "I hate you/almost as much as I hate myself." It is so powerful to see that truth laid bare on the page, and his reasoning—that he hates his body because it is the reason that he hates himself—rings so, so true. I suppose if I had thought about it advance, knowing Terence reasonably well, I would have predicted that he would write something like this; but my imagination failed me, and to the extent that I thought about it at all I assumed the girls would write pieces addressing body hatred. And they did. It reflects their personalities well, too; Adeline comes out, ultimately, slightly optimistic, and Amelia and Paige both express a

more hardened view. Paige—I am so proud of her for again trying poetry!—is quite lovely looking, actually, and although it did not surprise me it did sadden me to see that she, like virtually every girl I have ever known, has wasted hours in front of a mirror. And Amelia. Amelia is one of the loudest, most vibrant people I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. She is not quiet, not in a context where she feels comfortable—as a junior in high school, she started a theater company and directed and starred in a musical at church. But as her poem explores, this doesn't always come naturally to her:

“...On these days, I am a deficiency.  
 And on these days, the scale and the small plate are important.  
 The brush, the pencil, the gloss, are important.  
 Staying quiet, staying hidden, this is important.  
 And I hate it.  
 Because I've learned to be loud.  
 And most days now, I'm loud.  
 Most days now, I'm fine.  
 But some days.....”

The eighth assignment asked my participants to reflect on deaths they have experienced.

This is my favorite of Terence's pieces:

*Death*

I still haven't cried about it  
 I don't intend to  
 And I'll probably get away with it

I asked Terence if his piece was about any specific death, and he said no, about his feelings toward death generally. I really loved the sucker punch of his third line: that he will probably get away with not crying, even though, perhaps, he feels that he is supposed to. It reminds me of the tension between not wanting to be seen as pathetic or overly emotional and not wanting to be cold and unfeeling.

Paige wrote about a dying cat. At the end she says:

“I sobbed and sobbed and begged for them to let me say goodbye to her, but the vets refused to let me say bye. Everyone was crying, even my dad, who is usually very unemotional, had tears rolling down his face. That night when I got home I changed the password on my computer to ‘ihatevets.’”

When I got her response, I confess that I emailed Paige back to say that I was sorry that she had lost her cat but that the last sentence of her piece had made me laugh out loud. It was just such a perfectly childish response, so angry and devastated.

All of my participants were drawn from a Unitarian Universalist church, and it shows in their responses—the pointing out, in a logical, rational, utterly UU way that no one knows what happens when we die; the mourning not being able to believe; the way that they wrestle with the concept of death’s inevitability. John and Adeline were especially explicit about this in their responses, and the latter made an important part about not just death but grieving:

“...because death isn't simply the transfer of a person from one place to another  
once you're gone  
there is no finding you again...”

I hadn’t originally planned on writing responses to each of my participants, but when we met Amelia asked me to, and I certainly couldn’t say no. I sent each participant a letter along with all of their work thus far. Although of course I had read every piece more than once, I hadn’t before compiled them in a linear fashion, and reading them that way was interesting. Previously, I had read each person’s assignments as they came in, with less of a sense of how their writing was moving along from piece to piece. It was gratifying to see how, in many ways, they had grown as writers; it was also fascinating to see patterns and themes emerge. By looking carefully at each person’s output in the context of all of their work, I could see more clearly what “writing tics” they use. My hope in sending the letters was that it would give them some feedback and more importantly help them see clearly that

their writing mattered to me, would validate the vulnerability that had been brave enough to bring forth.

I then asked my participants to revise one piece. Mostly they changed very little—Adeline and John especially. Terence seemed to have taken his body poem and made it more him: I think the body piece is one of the most powerful things he wrote this year, and his writing got even a little stronger with his revision. Amelia was similar; her relationship piece got stronger with revision. Paige did by far the most dramatic revision, changing a fairly prosaic piece into a poem. I don't think it is as quite as good as her relationship piece, but I loved seeing her try something new. More than the results, though, I asked them to revise because revision is one of the most annoying and one of the most important parts of the writing process. So often I think the pressure of having to write so much for school—especially in the higher level programs my participants tended to take part in—there is just no time for revisions, and I wanted them to at least explore the concept.

Finally, I asked my participants for their conclusions on the project. I also interviewed them about their reactions to the project: the interviews and their written conclusions are interwoven in chapter six.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

Nine months ago, in my thesis proposal, I wrote that my inquiry question was to be “What stories do I tell myself to explain my identity and where do those stories come from? How can educators support students to find and tell authentic stories and make meaning while embracing the complexity of their own and others’ history?”

As I suspect is often the case with heuristic research, I ended up discovering much more about the purposes of this project as I went about it. I never ended up doing as much work on using narratives for social justice education as I had planned originally, nor did I do a lot of research around specific ways that educators can support students. Instead, I found that my reading and my work led me to explore other avenues.

The question that I really wanted to explore, I discovered, was this: how do we, as human beings, use stories? It's a huge question and not one that can be completely answered in any one thesis, certainly not in mine. However, my research showed me some clear answers. We use narratives in social justice, as we saw in the poetry of witness, and to advance social justice in the classroom, as explored by Bell and others. Our attachment to stories is as old as we are, going all the way back to the Neanderthals, and the creation and spread of myths illustrates some of the reasons why we need stories. They help us to contain our fears around the things that we cannot know and give structure to our world. Booker shows us that we use the same *kinds* of stories over and over and Gottschall showed us some of the ways that our love of storytelling is inherent.

Most importantly for my purposes, stories can help us in identity formation and construction. As discussed by MacAdams, self-narratives are a vital part of development. For me, this was borne out beautifully in the real-world examples I was lucky enough to observe and to facilitate. From Lou, I learned the importance of young children using stories in ways that allow them to scaffold their own memory. This was a revelation to me: despite having worked with young children for many years, despite having done fairly extensive work on children's literature, I was taken about by my realization that Lou was engaging in this process just as much as my adolescent participants. It was unconscious, but it was absolutely there. Lou is a smart child, but I don't think she's at all alone in doing this. Watching her tell

and retell countless stories in an often successful effort to remind herself of the world and her place in it was fascinating.

It was equally fascinating to see my adolescent participants grow over the course of our project. There are certainly ways that I could have improved the project's structure.. The participants had mixed feelings about the prompts. John felt he couldn't relate. Adeline read them over and over if she was having a hard time with the topic. Amelia liked reading them and felt that she wouldn't necessarily have known how to approach the writing. Adeline "both loved and hated how big" the prompts were—she liked having the option to write about anything but also spent a long time trying to figure out how to approach a given prompt. John would have liked more prompts, and Paige would have liked to write about more "philosophical" topics. Amelia felt that I should have included an assignment about passions and goals. I could, also, have chosen to share work from the very beginning, but, I think because of my own discomfort around vulnerability, it literally never occurred to me until my advisor and I realized that she had assumed all along that I was sharing and I had never thought of that as a possibility.

Now, as I reach the end of this project, I realize that what I think I wanted all along was for my students, and myself, to see that their stories can help their lives to feel cohesive, that the act of remembering, documenting and sharing their stories is brave, and that their stories matter.

I did not explicitly tell my students that their stories matter. Instead, I hoped that the process of sharing and of receiving feedback would show them this. I did tell them that I wanted to see if this writing would help to build authentic voice. I can see in their conclusions that they took this seriously. Paige wrote "the pieces definitely helped me to write with a voice." Amelia, in both her writing and in our talk, expressed that this project has helped her feel more comfortable writing about herself; she said that she used to have a

“really hard time writing about [her]self;” that she has a “weird ego where [she] is simultaneously really full of myself and really...insecure.” She liked being “forced” to write about herself, finding it “literally uncomfortable” at first and then it got easier. I think in some ways essentially forcing my students to write about themselves also underlines that they matter, fundamentally.

Adeline gave me perhaps the most compelling conclusion (and not coincidentally, one that mirrored my own process in some ways): she wrote that she used to feel that her feelings—and thus her stories—were “too destructive” to let out, but that the process of doing so anyway was freeing. I can’t think of a better outcome for her or for any of us.

Terence told me that he did not really consider how much of himself to share: “I just sort of let it happen as it did.” He describes himself as “worried” at first before he “grew into it;” he was a bit nervous when we started sharing the work, but again, “grew into it.” Paige, too, “just wrote whatever came first on my mind” without worrying about how much she might be sharing.

This project raises some important questions about writing as it taught in schools today. My participants all either attend or recently graduated from Montgomery County Public Schools. They are, generally, good students. Most of them did at least some AP or Honors classes. MCPS is, at least locally, a very well-regarded school district. And yet the information I received from them about the writing they did in school troubled me. Terence explained that this process allowed “more freedom and less pressure,” a sentiment echoed by others; he also said, making excellent use of the rhetorical question, that “they [school] want us to fit a criteria, there’s an ideal that they want us to fulfill, and if we’re trying to be ideal, we can’t really be ourselves, can we?” John thought that he wrote more “interesting” things for this project than in school, and Paige felt it was “definitely different to write about our own lives and be encouraged to have our own voice.” In our conversations my students



revealed that the writing they did for school basically taught them to write for the teacher or the test, not for themselves: for example, Adeline said, she is writing a “satirical analysis on the movie ‘Mean Girls,’ but everyone is writing a five paragraph essay...you have to literally fill in the blank...if you don’t then you get a bad grade, so it’s very hard to put in your own twist...it’s literally almost like you are playing a Mad Libs game and filling in the given outline.” John echoed this, saying that “in school, instead of writing what you want to write and what you think, you’re writing...what the teacher wants you to write...and putting your own spin on it.”

This kind of cookie-cutter, write to the test approach seems to me to betray what writing in adolescence—even in school—should be about: developing authentic voice that helps the student understand who he or she is becoming and what his or her perspective on the world is. Obviously, students should learn about academic writing, about how to cite and develop a thesis and structure a paragraph and an essay. But not all writing should sound the same, either. I should be able to *hear* a student’s voice in his or her work. Their sense of humor, their history, their slant on things, should all come through. School shouldn’t be about developing the ability to quickly and cogently fill in a Mad-Libs essay; it should be about what good writing is. Lucid, pithy, filled with personality. This is where the best writing succeeds, why people read television recaps and book reviews and personal essays and news stories: because the writer has developed a voice that has captured the imagination. And as Nash argues, personal narratives can be scholarly. Using first rather than third person in a paper, even the most academic paper—heck, even in science—doesn’t automatically somehow disqualify it from academic standing and students should learn that their stories matter. Personal writing gives them room to play, to experiment with form and style and see what feels best. Adeline, for example, tried different styles—poetry and fiction—and then “fell into” slam poetry and liked it best. John felt that the project allowed him to “utilize a lot

of the writing techniques and devices” that he learned in school, so clearly, personal writing can be a way to experiment with what your English teacher has been saying all this time. All of my participants grew over the course of this project--John said that his writing had gotten “an infinite amount better” as he got more comfortable and also, he said, he has been getting better writing grades in school. Anecdote does not equal evidence, but it seems clear that this kind of writing can have some big advantages not just academically but personally.

We live, as always, in contentious times. Teaching students to write with perspective, with voice, is teaching them to think critically, so that they have the tools to better position themselves, and to shift when necessary. It is not taking away from academics but embracing the best of it.

Adeline felt that these assignments covered the “big aspects of people’s lives” and if the pieces were compiled you’d have an “accurate picture” of a life. It is my hope that this picture has helped my students to rediscover that they and their stories matter, that they are worth telling and that they deserve to be listened to.

It is clear from my work in this thesis that humans use stories in a variety of vitally important ways. Hardwired for story from our earliest days on the planet, we use these narratives to bear witness, to fight complacency and oppression. We use them to explore what feels too dangerous and frightening to look at without the cover of myth. We use them to scaffold our memories, to explore the truths of our own lives. We use them to construct our very selves: the stories we whisper to ourselves as we fall asleep at night, the narratives that haunt the backs of our minds, the tone that enters our unconscious when we are infants: these are some of the building blocks of self. We know we are here because our stories exist. In the space between myself and other people, between myself and the cultural context in which I exist—in that same place where play happens—I can find parts of my identity and my story. One of the unexpected findings in my research was the collective

nature of stories, how it is the interplay between vulnerability and self-narrative that accounts for much of the power of story. One of my primary goals for my participants was to realize that their stories matter, fundamentally: that although they do not and cannot matter to every person on earth, they mattered to me, and to other people who love them. This realization, that it matters to me that their stories matter, was startlingly in part for its implication: it matters, then, that *my* story matters.

Bruno Bettelheim wrote a classic book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, and the title floated through my head as I wrote this thesis. Bettelheim was speaking of fairy tales, saying that “the child intuitively comprehends that although these stories are unreal, they are not untrue”—and I think we can extrap[olate] that to all kinds of narrative. Our memories are fallible and we are unreliable narrators even, if not especially, to our own stories—but that doesn’t make our own self-narratives any less true.

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